

A WOMAN FINDS HER FUTURE IN THE PAST

Elizabeth Graver. Elizabeth Graver is the author of the novel "Unravelling" and the short-story collection "Have You Seen Me?" She teaches at Boston College. . Chicago Tribune ; Chicago, Ill. [Chicago, Ill]. 21 Dec 1997: 6.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The past isn't dead, it isn't even past," said William Faulkner in a phrase that could serve as an apt epigraph to Jonis Agee's rich and complex new novel, "South of Resurrection." Agee, the author of two previous novels and a story collection, takes as her central subject here the ways in which we are all formed, deformed and some-times even reformed by our pasts. "I thought . . . (w)hat was gone stayed gone, what was dead stayed dead," says the novel's narrator, Moline Bedwell. "But I was wrong."

The novel opens with Moline returning to her childhood home of Resurrection, Mo., after 23 years away. Her husband has re-cently died, and she has fallen out of touch with her grown son. Arriving with her dead sister's ashes in an urn, Moline's plan is to bury her sister, sell her parents' home and be on her way. Yet it quickly becomes clear that although Moline's sis-ter and parents are dead and gone, the place itself is alive and haunted and has her firmly in its grip.

Driving down the streets of Resurrection in her slick, expensive, red truck, Moline passes by "twenty-year-old cars, . . . some with wheels braced on cement blocks, hood or trunk lids blown away, others ticking away in the late afternoon heat, kids crawling in and out of their torn seats, running toys along their sides as if they were large mechanical family pets." She passes the statues in the town square: a Union soldier on the north side, a Confederate soldier on the south. She goes by buildings whose "peeling paint had faded to powdery pastels over their brick" and a "vacant lot clogged with fresh spring weeds." This beautifully rendered, layered landscape is ripe with history-personal, familial, national. "In a per-son's life," Moline tells us, "there's always some place that possesses them." And although she tells us that she is intent on leaving Resur-rection, we realize early on that she is there to stay.

FULL TEXT

SOUTH OF RESURRECTION

By Jonis Agee

Viking, 353 pages, \$24.95

By Elizabeth Graver

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Inspired partly by Agee's own search for her roots in Versailles, Mo., "South of Resurrection" takes Moline on a quest that reveals how one cannot flee the past and still live fully in the present. Like Faulkner, Agee uses one family's story to gather in and reveal broader histories, in this case the saga of a rural heartland community struggling with racial tension, poverty, broken families, alcohol abuse and the arrival of big business. Each chapter opens with a quote drawn from a Missouri history, geology or folklore text, reminding us that Moline's story is just one among many, one stratum in the bedrock that forms a place. "Everywhere I looked," Moline says, "there was a layer of time over time, iris over bones, always something growing, never really sealing the wounds."

The wounds in this novel are many. We see a town struggling to keep its identity in a world in which Walmart and McDonald's have moved in and outsiders (and some insiders) from Heart Hog Corp. are trying to buy out the farms and start a giant, corporate pig farm. We see a town filled with tired, single mothers and worn-out farmers, with descendants of slaves and slaveholders, with several wandering ghosts. As we get to know Moline, we learn about her own wounds: that she is mourning a sister she never really understood and a son she has lost contact with, that she did not so much leave as flee the town at 16, after her boyfriend, Dayrell Bell, and his brother, McCall, were involved in a car accident that led to the death of a local girl.

This accident, and Moline's efforts to come to terms with her own role in what happened, form much of the backbone of the novel, as does Moline's unfolding relationship to Dayrell, who still lives in town and quickly becomes her lover again. Many of the scenes between the two of them are wonderful; we see them both fearing and longing for each other as they try to transform their young infatuation into something they can trust in middle age—a new, weather-beaten kind of family made from odds and ends. But although the book takes on bleak subjects, it is far from depressing; Moline's voice is ironic, bright and knowing, able to see humor in the darkest moments. When, rarely, she descends into self-pity, she is reprimanded by a chorus of imaginary widows in her head: "We were the righteous," Moline thinks at one point. "Self-righteous, the Widows pronounced."

At times, the novel does falter. Sometimes the rich detail of place and circumstance becomes too dense and overwrought, and the narrative gets bogged down and threatens to lose its way or descend into slapstick. The writing, too, is somewhat uneven, evocative details sitting side by side with language that is overly explanatory or strained in its down-homeness ("it was me groaning, . . . as dark and dirty as the backseat of an old Chevy."). Moline's 23 years away from Resurrection also raise some questions: She presents those years as repressed and

shiny, "so clean," but it is hard to imagine this gutsy, tactile, complicated narrator living such a scrubbed, unseeing life for so long, and her estranged son and dead hus-band feel more like ideas than characters.

But these reservations seem minor in light of the ambitious scope of the project. This generous and abundant novel celebrates the gritty, scarred layers of the daily world with specificity and wisdom. At one point Moline recounts how, as she sat in the Resurrection cemetery, she heard the creek quietly murmuring, an "agreeable sound, like hundreds of stories being told one after another, one over another, with each one real and true, but not louder or more important than any other." "South of Resurrection" pays homage to such stories, and to the richness that resides in the history of any person, family or town.

Illustration

PHOTOS 2; Caption: PHOTO (color): Book cover. PHOTO (color): Photo by Judie Anderson.

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