

BEYOND THE DRAWL

a review by Katherine
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Heather Newton. *McMullen Circle*. Regal House Publishing, 2022.

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Practicing attorney **HEATHER NEWTON** is also a creative writing teacher at UNC Asheville. She is the author of the novel *Under The Mercy Trees* (HarperCollins, 2011), which won the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award, was chosen by the Women's National Book Association as a Great Group Reads Selection, and was named an "Okra Pick" by the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance. Her latest novel is *The Puppeteer's Daughters* (Turner Publishing, 2022).

North Carolina fiction writer Heather Newton's second book, *McMullen Circle*, is the intricate collection of stories I needed when I was first exploring the mosaic that is Southern literature. I wasn't exposed to it as a young reader. Our bookshelves at home were a treasure trove of C.S. Lewis, Immanuel Kant, J.R.R. Tolkien, Adrienne Rich, and Sylvia Plath. I was introduced to Southern fiction by the 1984 novel *Cold Sassy Tree* by Olive Ann Burns, a paperback someone had given my mother as a gift, which sat, untouched, for weeks on her bedside table. I was thirteen, and within two paragraphs I was spellbound.

In particular, I was captivated by dialogue that wove words together like the threads of a bur-lap sack, material strong enough to carry the weight of characters' thoughts and feelings but porous enough to let sounds slip through the cracks and scatter like chicken feed. I wanted more of the sounds that felt foreign to this rural Midwesterner, but meaning that was deeply familiar.

I came to realize eventually that this literal transcription of Southern dialect isn't required for a novel to be Southern, and when too heavy-handed could in fact be distracting. Heather Newton knows this, so *McMullen Circle* isn't filled with the vernacular of mid-century North Georgia. It doesn't need to be, because the intricate, curious, and integral vignettes of a small community are interesting enough.

The basic experience of living in community is a universal one, complicated individually by our own nuanced experiences

of belonging and disconnection, of satisfaction and disappointment. *McMullen Circle* layers together the uniquely personal perspectives of the folks who make up Tonola Falls, GA, against the backdrop of a desegregated South still sifting through the ongoing trauma of war in Vietnam. The voices of these neighbors and family members and the faces from their pasts reverberate against each other in what would be, were it written in anything less than Newton's intricately piquant style, a cacophony of tones. Instead, *McMullen Circle* amplifies the rhythmic, irresistible chorus of life in a small Southern neighborhood.

In the opening story, "Wild Things," Newton contrasts the drama of the upcoming investiture of Prince Charles with an introduction to the McMullen Boarding School headmaster's wife, Sarah Pierce. She has just tasked her daughter, nine-year-old Lorna, and a boy from the neighborhood, eight-year-old Chase, to pick dandelion greens from the yard for a lunch salad. Lorna and Chase appear throughout the book as they interact with characters that other stories focus on, a reminder of the freedom once available to children and the connections that grew from such unfettered exploration of their community.

Connections like Chase and Danny in "Tupelo Rose," where the nostalgia of World War II is confronted with the reality of post-war PTSD. Danny, a tailgunner who survived a deadly plane crash only to be captured and held for the remainder of the war



COURTESY OF HEATHER NEWTON

in a POW camp, has a gentle reliance on Chase's calming presence. "Danny rested a palm on the top of Chase's head. He could feel the warm oil at the roots of Chase's hair from all his running around. Danny's tremors began to subside" (36).

The book's back cover will tell you that this novel-in-stories is about heroism, and I won't disagree. Each resident of *McMullen Circle* faces decisions and circumstances that require bravery and even heroic action of one category or another. But as I tell my university English students, "No one writes a book that is just about one thing." So while the question of what makes a hero is certainly embedded in Newton's collection, there are also other questions about family commitment, community obligation, and social striation. These mag-

netic characters, certainly not all above reproach, are written with an empathy and charisma that lends a genuine kindness to even the most reflexively unpleasant of neighbors.

Newton did not invite us here to judge; rather we are asked to witness, to observe through the fullness of our own human vulnerability. And as she peels away the layers of these dozen stories to reveal the carefully hidden frailty that even a cocky bomber pilot cannot always conceal, the tremendous grief of a child's transmuted love, or the heart-breaking selfishness required to mother through difficult times, Newton walks us around the twelve hands of her clock with patience, clarity, and immeasurable compassion. At the end we are not relieved, exactly, of the burden of witnessing. More so, we are ready to begin again. ■