

NEW FICTION RECKONS WITH LANDSCAPE OF CHANGE

a review by Kristina L. Knotts

Naima Coster. *What's Mine and Yours: A Novel*. Grand Central Publishing, 2021.

Kevin McIlvoy. *One Kind Favor: A Novel*. WTAW Press, 2021.

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NAIMA COSTER is a novelist, essayist, and creative writing teacher in Brooklyn, NY. Her debut novel, *Halsey Street* (Little A, 2017) was a finalist for the 2018 Kirkus Prize for Fiction and was longlisted for the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award. Her essays have appeared in various publications, including *The New York Times*, *Elle*, *Time*, and *The Paris Review Daily*. She was named a National Book Foundation 5 under 35 Honoree in 2020. She has taught in creative writing programs across the US, including the Duke University Young Writers Camp in 2016 and Wake Forest University from 2016 to 2018.



Two new novels set in contemporary North Carolina display the familial and social fractures instigated by racial trauma and a shifting social landscape. Naima Coster's *What's Mine and Yours* portrays a family struggling with the strains of racism and prejudice, while Kevin McIlvoy's *One Kind Favor* intersperses surrealism with unsparing truth-telling to portray the conditions that led to a black youth's murder and the fallout in the small community.

What's Mine and Yours is Naima Coster's second novel, set primarily in an unnamed town in the North Carolina Piedmont region, though other parts of the novel take place in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Paris. The novel covers 1992 to 2020, twenty-eight years of race, class, colorism, and social stratification that the novel's young people wrestle with and endure. Coster's work follows two different families and shows how their children emerge from early trauma and disruption and grow

into adulthood to confront their early choices.

What's Mine and Yours is an impressive follow-up to *Halsey Street* (2017), Coster's notable first novel that explores a changing Brooklyn, NY, neighborhood undergoing gentrification and its characters' adjustment to the alteration in their own lives – whether it's a change in work, school, or the loss of a loved one. *Halsey Street*, like *What's Mine and Yours*, exposes families whose parenting styles are sometimes dysfunctional, and the impact on their children is explored here as the young people go on to build relationships of their own. Both novels, though set in different regions, show how parents are often dealing with their own past loss, unintentionally impacting their children's adult relationships.

The opening chapter in *What's Mine and Yours* introduces Ray and his son, Gee, preparing Superfine, a small restaurant and bakery, for a journalist's visit in hopes it will improve their

ABOVE Naima Coster (left) talking about her novel *What's Mine and Yours* with Christina Baker Kline, hosted by Flyleaf Books, Chapel Hill, NC, 2 Mar. 2021 ([Watch interview here.](#))

business's future for Ray and Linette, Superfine's owner and Ray's mentor. Gee is "one child with [Ray] – easy, bright – and another without him" (6). This first chapter, which ends with Ray's murder, sets in motion its devastating impact on Gee and Ray's friends and loved ones.

The young people in Coster's novel come of age as their school system integrates children from another part of town, inevitably stoking racial tensions. The novel's characters are varied in terms of their temperaments, choices, and decisions, as well as how they confront change. Above all, Coster has empathy for her characters. The subjects in *What's Mine and Yours* work in small steps to improve their lives and have to recognize their own flaws, sometimes imperfectly and unsuccessfully. Even characters as confounding as Lacey May have sympathetic moments and are treated compassionately by the author. (Lacey May is an openly racist white woman once married to a Columbian man with Latina daughters.)

Coster creates a world that she could certainly revisit in future works as her characters' growth suggests other stories waiting to be told. For instance, the maternal characters here are flawed, yet capable of self-awareness and change, and the novel shows healthy single-parent families as well as ones where difficulties exist, especially when compounded by poverty and scarcity of resources. While tra-

KEVIN MCILVOY'S previous books include *A Waltz* (Lynx House Press, 1981), *The Fifth Station* (Collier Books, 1989), *Little Peg* (Atheneum, 1990), *Hyssop* (TriQuarterly Books, 1998), and *At the Gate of All Wonder* (Tupelo Press, 2018). He has been published in *The Scoundrel*, *The Collagist*, *Pif*, *The Kenyon Review Online*, and *The Courtland Review*, among others. He is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Fiction and taught in the Warren Wilson College MFA Program in creative writing from 1987 to 2019. He lives in Asheville, NC.

ditionally, the South is seen as a place consisting of white people and black people, Coster shows a more ethnically diverse region that has citizens from Columbia, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. The one same-sex relationship in the novel is the happiest and the most supportive of any relationship depicted. Above all, Coster uses a humanistic brush to draw her characters, showing that all in her world are worthy and have a story to tell.

Kevin McIlvoy's North Carolina in *One Kind Favor* is more ominous, even deadly, especially for its citizens of color. His sixth novel takes a surreal, Joycean narrative journey through contemporary North Carolina. The novel's epigraph, dedicated to the memory of "North Carolina victims of racial violence or injustice, past and present," sets the scene for the story's events. McIlvoy has discussed how the 2014 controversial death in North Carolina of Lennon Lacy (a suspected hate crime/lynch-

ing but officially ruled a suicide) prompted his exploration of racial trauma that haunts his fictional town of Cord, NC, in *One Kind Favor*.

From the novel's first chapter, the unnamed narrator, in a kind of Greek chorus fashion, paints the town's setting with a sardonic and cutting tone. A chief setting for some of the action is a "combined bar and consignment shop" that is so instrumental in the town's community and becomes a metaphor for recurrence and reemergence. This important first chapter introduces the idea of "white Presences and Black Presences" (3). Some of the Presences (or apparitions) are recent and some are centuries old, but all seem to have suffered an untimely death or murder. Describing the socio-political setting within North Carolina (and within the greater US), the narrator tells us that President Obama's election heightened white racists' anxiety, that the essence of the KKK



ABOVE Kevin McIlvoy (left) talking about his novel *One Kind Favor* with Steve Almond, hosted by Malaprop's Bookstore, Asheville, NC, 26 May 2021 ([Watch interview here.](#))

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never went away, and that the NRA's politicization polarizes the country. The chapter ends with an angry diatribe: "The moneyed who died sucking the poor dry are here sucking Koch and Pope, and more of the Kochsuckers and the SuckPopes and Mercenaries are here than ever before, now that the red-hats rule us, blood and soil" (4). Evidently, the narrator does not suffer fools. This voice prepares readers for an unconventional and gripping tale.

One Kind Favor's events begin in November 2016 and center on the relationships among the main characters: Acker, Lincoln Lennox, and Woolman. Acker is the (white) female companion and friend of Lincoln (who is black) and Woolman (who is white). Of indeterminate age, Acker is no typical Southern belle. As the narrator says, "Acker, too, could be confusing. Thirty or so, or fifty or sixty or so, or undefinably epochal, she had a punk thing going from the white face makeup to the blue lipstick (black sometimes) to the white fingernails to the bright white boots so bright you could not really see her feet. And that – the blurring of her feet – is, perhaps, why she seemed without weight" (8). The reader wonders then if Acker is a Presence. The chapter goes on to say that "She was lifelike. . . . 'Realistic, am I right?' she said to Woolman the very first time she caught his gaze" (9). As an older white woman, she would not seem to be the usual companion for two teenage boys, but as the narrator tells it, "Our community in North Carolina was not at all where Acker belonged, but

at certain times revenants like her did appear out of nowhere, did grow here, became regulars and not and regulars once more" (9). Since a revenant is one who has returned, readers must discern why Acker has returned or appeared in Cord. Her relationship to Lincoln and Woolman is critical, and readers who delve into this story will speculate on her role or connection to those in the town, or the reason for any Presence in Cord for that matter.

Early in the novel Lincoln is found hanging – like the actual Lennon Lacy – from a swing set. Lincoln's lynching takes place on November 8, 2016, the day of the American presidential election. Though Lincoln's death is thought by most to be a murder, officials deem it a suicide. His death sets off a series of stories – from Lincoln's mother Jadia's grief and her search in the swamp for the truth of his death, to the arrival of the mysterious Mr. Panther as an agent who seeks the truth of Lincoln's death, accompanied by a mockingbird, who embodies the spirit of a deceased teenage girl, as well as the arrival of other agents who investigate Lincoln's death.

Along with its critique of deadly racism, *One Kind Favor* explores the corporate corruption of those who profit from the fears and prejudices of the white working class in America. While this is not a new story in the South, the novel shows how people such as Woolman's mother Marie works for the Americans for Prosperity Foundation to identify "politically 'aligned but unengaged' people among the populations of rural poor and middle-class-poor who

could be set afire with hate and who, guided rightly, would spread it like coal ash" (56). McIlvoy's jeremiad is directed at the forces in American society that actively work to stoke division and hatred. Often the voice in this novel is sharp, sardonic but sometimes exhausted and disappointed in the manipulation taking place.

McIlvoy's prose ranges from straightforward, reportage style when the narrator is describing the events of Lincoln's death to a speculative, inventive tone when describing the various Presences inhabiting Cord and their actions. There is even a kind of *Alice in Wonderland* character (named Alice) who stumbles into the odd wonderland/nightmare of Cord and is trapped. In fact, from the novel's first page, the narrator, commenting on the consignment store, says the location "has been a place of escape – every community has such rabbit holes – for those of us wishing to be ourselves and trueselves and otherselves" (3).

McIlvoy's style is, depending on the scene, whimsical, fantastical, earthy, and absurdly funny at times, but the reader can see there are life and death issues ready to boil over: of injustice, inhumanity, and desecration of human life – the theme of racism haunting America is inescapable here. The absurdity and the haunting continues until the last page.

McIlvoy's novel, like Coster's, warrants a second reading as there are sections to untangle and passages that deepen on a second reading. Their portrayal of the shifting social and cultural landscape of North Carolina is unflinching and more necessary than ever. ■