

FADING INTO REFLECTION

a review by Sharon E. Colley

Spencer K.M. Brown. *Move Over Mountain: A Novel*. J. New Books, 2019.

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SPENCER K.M. BROWN is the recipient of the 2016 Penelope Niven Award and the 2018 Flying South Fiction Prize, and a finalist for both the 2019 Doris Betts Fiction Prize and the 2019 Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize. His short fiction has twice been nominated for a Pushcart and has appeared in *Scalawag*, *Parhelion*, *Empty Sink*, *Prime Number*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and others. He lives in Winston-Salem, NC.

ABOVE Spencer K.M. Brown reading from his debut novel at Scuppernong Books, Greensboro, NC, 15 Feb. 2020



PHOTOGRAPH BY AMANDA BROWN

Present day for Spencer K.M. Brown's debut novel, *Move Over Mountain*, is October 2053, but the book is not fantasy or science fiction. The sixty-eight-year-old protagonist, John Underwood, says of the year, "You never think those far-off dates will ever arrive, and if they do, one imagines them to be far-fetched sci-fi Jetson-esque times – not some boring continuation of yesterday. Not a time where your spouse gets sick" (2).

Move Over Mountain is a text that does not strain to appear "Southern." While Underwood has a deeply meditative attachment to North Carolina mountains and forests, his culture does not seem uniquely Southern. Underwood's early years and his high school girlfriend's life suggest the Grit Lit of Dorothy Allison, Kaye Gibbons, or Connie Mae Fowler, but those books couch the stories in specifically Southern aesthetics. *Move Over Mountain* could be set in many regions of the US. By utilizing a Southern setting reminiscent of many American spaces, the novel somewhat radically stresses the similarities rather than the differences between the South and a broader culture.

The plot focuses on the interior life of Underwood. His

exterior life is drama enough, as his comatose wife is slowly dying. Underwood reacts by withdrawing into reflection, as many do in moments of crisis. His meditations are especially poignant because of his lifelong difficulty connecting with others. While he finds meaning in his relationship with his wife, he is estranged from his daughter and seems to have difficulty connecting with those around him. This detachment makes his wife's impending death even more terrifying, and Underwood spends much of the novel reflecting on his past familial and romantic relationships.

Underwood's early life did not prepare him for human connections. His mother struggled with substance abuse and suffered domestic violence at the hands of her boyfriend. Underwood's father, a psychiatrist at a mental hospital in Asheville, NC, kidnapped his son from the mother. The father cares deeply for his son, though he also struggles with depression and alcoholism.

Throughout his life, Underwood suffers with seizures, which he refers to as "episodes"; these sudden physical crises often cause blackouts and contribute to his sense of isolation. Underwood's only friend as a teen is Aliza, a girl whose homelife is worse than his. Underwood explains, "We were not outcasts, because outcasts would mean that at one point in time you were part of something in order to be cast out from it. Instead, Aliza and I were the forgotten. The unrecalled and unremembered. We came to relish in this" (141). The reader can see emotional parallels between his sudden loss of Aliza and his impending loss of his wife.

The novel is not only about Underwood's past, however. While it focuses on the narrator's attempts to sift through his life for

meaning as his wife dies, the novel also captures with painful honesty his lonely trips home while his wife is in the hospital. Time seems to freeze, for both character and reader, as Underwood encounters interminable waiting. Early on, he states, "This silence is killing me" (30). In this time of crisis, Underwood ponders his childhood, marriage, God, nature, and the future, working to figure out the puzzle of his life.

Reflecting on the past and meditating on the meaning of life are understandable responses to a present crisis. In this novel, however, the reflection sometimes overwhelms the event or idea explored, as in this early passage:

I am of this habit, of telling myself that nothing is to happen right now, right here; in fact, nothing will ever or could ever happen right now, in this moment. No, it is better left for another time, another moment. I will not die today, not right now, but perhaps tomorrow. Tomorrow, the world will come to a quiet end. Tomorrow is when it will all come to a halt, when the soft song of autumn will let its last chords ring out, when the rooster will cry its last dawn into being, when the rivers will no longer bend with the earth and will slow and slow until they remain motionless at last and fall in love with the earth beneath. (1–2)

While Underwood communicates here his aesthetic, he also takes the reader down a dense, meandering trail that obscures the destination. Meditative moments like this can be in keeping with the novel's tone, but they can also be overwhelming at times.

Move Over Mountain tells the story of a man who struggles to relate to the people in his life. By the end, the character weaves together a variety of personal and spiritual concepts to help him understand life and the connections he wants to make. ■