

LIVING ON SHIFTING GROUND

*a review by Monica
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Judith Turner-Yamamoto.
Loving the Dead and Gone.
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JUDITH TURNER-YAMAMOTO is an art historian who grew up in a small mill town in rural North Carolina. Her award-winning writing has taken her around the world, interviewing luminaries such as Annie Leibowitz and Frank Gehry, and winning awards, including two Virginia Arts Commission fellowships, an Ohio Arts Council fellowship, and the Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize, among others. She has taught fiction at the Chautauqua Writers' Center, Chautauqua Institution, the Danville Writer's Conference, and the Writers' Center, Bethesda, MD.

ABOVE Judith Turner-Yamamoto at a book signing at Quail Ridge Books, Raleigh, 15 Sept. 2022



Loving the Dead and Gone by Judith Turner-Yamamoto is a haunted and haunting account of two generations of North Carolina women whose lives intersect and collide through two tragic deaths: the suicide of one woman's secret beloved and the senseless fatal car accident of another woman. The novel begins with a fatal car accident in 1963 and the ripples of trauma that ensue from this death, trauma experienced not only by Darlene, the wife of the late Donald Ray, but also by Clayton, who discovers the accident, and his wife, Berta Mae. Their stories are interspersed with flashbacks from forty years earlier, when we learn the story of Berta Mae's mother, Aurilla, and gain insight into why she seems so hateful to her daughter, with whom she frequently clashes. The anguish reverberates throughout these relationships as well as their relationships with their families and even their larger communities.

The plotlines intertwine and circle back on themselves. We are introduced to an embittered Berta Mae, alienated from her husband, daughter, and mother in the present-day of 1963, and then we flash back forty years to her mother's life, learning about the emotionally barren life that Aurilla endured in a loveless marriage, living in a crowded

house with her husband's extended family. Throughout, these characters grab at brief glimpses of joy and love, learning that – even in the best of circumstances – happiness is fleeting and love is difficult.

There are no easy answers in this novel. Its preoccupation with grief and regret is rooted in its examination of a myriad of types of love: romantic, parental, and friendship, and the ways that death and distance can skew, damage, and even trap people in these relationships, threatening what once looked like true love. The plotlines between these characters reach soap opera levels at times, as death and loss draw together unlikely pairs into clandestine romance and connection. These connections emphasize the Faulknerian theme of Southern literature that the past is never fully gone. As past decisions and tragedies continue to reverberate, the very landscape contains a history of trauma.

One of the strengths of the novel is the description of nature, which provides an undercurrent of the inescapable past, such as within this description of Aurilla's mother Leonora's house:

The neighborhood was an oasis of green. Ivy covered the frame walls; yellow roses ran up the trellis behind the swing on the front porch. The

bushes and trees were as old as the house itself, built before the Civil War. Twisting scuppernong vines covered the grape arbor out back. The flowers in the cutting garden grew so thick you had to turn sideways to get between the rows. In the middle of it all was the vegetable garden with an herb border. (97)

In this scene, Aurilla is becoming aware of the lush vegetation of her childhood home, lushness she was indifferent to until leaving home for the emotionally barren, physically demanding married life at her mother-in-law's house, where the closest to a garden she has is raking designs in the dirt. In Aurilla's life – and in the lives of many of these characters – nature reflects the emotional life of the people who live there, the history of the region, and even the brevity of life. In this description, even historical events and man-made structures are susceptible to time and nature; twisted vines and trees endure even as houses and relationships decay.

And yet, nature responds to human cultivation, as the vegetable garden reflects. The characters in *Loving the Dead and Gone* do persist and persevere, whether together or apart. The novel opens with Clayton alone, discovering the body of Donald Ray, who has been killed in a car accident after a day of fishing: "A man couldn't work on a spring afternoon like that.

Hot, like the first day of summer, the sun made everything green come up looking brighter than you ever mentioned. You wanted to sleep the earth was working so hard, and I didn't know a better place to do that than at the end of a fishing rod" (1). And the novel ends with Clayton, too, alone in his car, coming home to his wife Berta Mae, also interacting with nature in significant ways:

The tough yet supple branches swayed together with a clattering sound like the twilight chatter of birds, then parted to reveal the open sweep of the pasture, and beyond, the fields newly-planted with fescue. I got out of the truck, knowing I would smell grass or cow dung, depending on which way the wind was blowing, and that the thin crust of ground would give beneath my feet as I crossed the bare yard that led to home. (245)

All of the characters in *Loving the Dead and Gone* must navigate their own difficult ground, affected by the direction the wind is blowing at any given moment, more or less aware of how their environment has brought them to their current circumstances. Through these characters, we learn that "loving the dead and gone" may be painful, but it can sometimes be less painful and complicated than engaging with those still here and alive. ■