

DARK SECRETS OF CAROLINA GIRLHOOD

a review by Karin Zipf

Meagan Church. *The Girls We Sent Away: A Novel*. Sourcebooks Landmark, 2024.

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KARIN ZIPF, born and raised in North Carolina, is a Professor of History at East Carolina University. She is the author of two historical monographs, both focused on childhood and girlhood in North Carolina history. The most recent, *Bad Girls at Samarcand: Sexuality and Sterilization in a Southern Juvenile Reformatory* (Louisiana State University Press, 2016), is winner of the Jules and Frances Landry Award for Outstanding Book in Southern Studies and the Ragan Old North State Award for Nonfiction. Her current book project explores human trafficking in the late twentieth-century agricultural South.

MEAGAN CHURCH received a BA in English from Indiana University. A native Midwesterner, she now lives in North Carolina.

In the mid-twentieth-century South, white women may have gained suffrage, but as girls they enjoyed virtually no rights at all. In two immersive and imaginative novels, author Meagan Church offers historically grounded stories that deeply personalize the impact of the era's restrictive sexualization of adolescent and teen girls who identified as white. In the ideal racial terms of Jim Crow segregation, white girls of this era embodied the purity of the race. As a result, adults placed strict expectations on girls' behavior, both public and private. Boys could hardly fathom the "extra level of scrutiny, the added layers of expectations, pressure, and responsibility," Church writes, that her protagonist Lorraine "faced for being a girl" (23). Church's evocative stories draw for inspiration from family experience and North Carolina institutional history. In clear and cogent storytelling, she shows up-close what happens when girls fall from their pedestal or, worse, suffer family circumstances that prevent them from climbing its first step. In the girls' stories, one written in first person and the other in limited third-person, Church explores the thoughts, fears, and emotions of her protagonists. In profoundly personal terms, Church exposes the confusion, terror, and heartbreak "wayward" white girls experienced at the hands of the state.

Church juxtaposes the dreams of the protagonist against her stark realities. In *The Girls We Sent Away*, seventeen-year-old Lorraine begins her senior year of high school a seasoned lifeguard and star student. She dreams of college and answering the call

of her president to "go where no man has gone before." Starry-eyed by the Space Race, she vows to become an astronaut. But one warm summer night her college-bound boyfriend Clint had seduced her. He has left for college, and at the start of her senior year she discovers she is pregnant. Horrified by the possibility of shame brought on them by an out-of-wedlock birth, her parents aim for a wedding. But when Lorraine pursues Clint about the arrangement, he swears off both her and the baby. Church writes, "Lorraine still couldn't believe the boy who claimed he loved her, the one who had initiated all of this, had so easily walked away and left her all alone" (87). Her parents send her to a maternity home, part of a network of institutions that secretly housed pregnant white girls, managed their child-births, adopted out the babies, and sent the birth mothers home to resume their lives. The dark secrets and suffocating rules were meant to save her reputation, though not intended to help her realize her dreams.

Church explains in an author's note that four million unwed pregnant US girls and women were sent to maternity homes, sometimes suffering coerced or forced surrender of their children. The maternity home experience lasted just a few months and, in most cases, saved their parents' middle-class reputations. Yet many girls never recovered. The trauma and shame suffered there, Church writes, led to "alcohol abuse, drug addiction, multiple marriages and countless [low paying] jobs" (323).

A girl did not have to be pregnant to suffer sexualized trauma

at the hands of the state. Church's *The Last Carolina Girl* contends with the experience of nearly eight thousand North Carolinians who suffered forced sterilizations between 1933 and 1977. The bureaucratic history of the North Carolina Eugenics campaign is well-documented. In short, North Carolina created a Eugenics Board in 1933 to "review" applications by social workers, physicians, and institutions for sterilization of North Carolinians considered "unfit" or feebleminded." Ruled constitutional by the US Supreme Court in 1927 and adopted by the Nazis in 1933, sterilization in North Carolina promised to save the purity of the white race. The history of sterilization is the backstory, the unspoken context, of Church's novel. In this book, she again employs a limited narrative to expose the front-end trauma of the victims, usually girls ages ten to nineteen. Until the late 1950s, most of those victims identified as white, but later the demographics shifted sharply towards girls of African American descent.

The Last Carolina Girl is set in the 1930s, when white girls were the prime target. Thirteen-year-old Leah Payne lives with her devoted father, a lumberjack, in depression-era Brunswick County. Leah lives and copes with a congenital disability, but otherwise is a "normal" kid. Despite poverty and motherlessness, Leah is happy in Brunswick County. She attends school and roams freely in the rural environs of her neighborhood. The Paynes also benefit from close relations with their neighbor-landlords, the Barnas

and their teenage son, Jesse, Leah's best friend. Life is difficult, but a scaffolding of community keeps them afloat.

Then a single tragedy completely changes the trajectory of Leah's life. She is forced to live with a family in Matthews, a small town near Charlotte and a four-hour drive from home. Leah becomes the "helpmate" or housemaid and, Harry Potter style, takes a broom closet for a room. Her guardian, a wife and mother named Mrs. Griffin, holds a mysterious resentment for Leah. When she learns of Leah's "disability," she calls in a physician who declares the child "unfit." In a breathtaking scene of betrayal, Church details the emotional despair that Leah experiences at the hands of Mrs. Griffin and the physician. Later, overhearing their conversation, Leah begins to understand what the doctor had done to her. "My breath caught in my throat," Church writes of Leah's sudden realization.

I stumbled backward, catching myself on the counter behind me. There was that word, that thing that Dr. Foster had talked about during the meeting and at the fair, with the posters behind him and the black-and-white rats on display. The talk of the betterment of things, the advancement of society by preventing some from procreating. And what was procreating other than making families of their own? (271)

It is this climax that begins the unraveling of many dark secrets Mrs. Griffin holds against her.

Today, women's reproductive rights are on the wane. Meanwhile, white supremacy rears

its ugly head. Meagan Church reminds us of the cultural consequences when the state enforces nearly impossible sexual expectations of "white purity" on girls and young women. In both books, the girls face antagonists who are almost always women and are unsympathetically cruel to the point that they can be difficult to connect with empathetically. And though there's the potential to read this as a focus on women against other women, eliding the male role, there is some basis for truth. A culture of misogyny means that not only are men conditioned to devalue women, but women can devalue and persecute other women, too.

Church's novels capture the larger context while adroitly humanizing the experiences of North Carolina girls from an earlier era beset by state-imposed restrictions on their sexuality. Readers no doubt will find themselves drawing connections to the modern age. Yet the serious subject matter does not overshadow the compelling characters and engaging storytelling. ■



COURTESY OF MEAGAN CHURCH