

PEOPLE AS PART, COMMUNITY AS SUM

a review by John Hanley

Anna Jean Mayhew. *Tomorrow's Bread*. Kensington Publishing, 2019.

De'Shawn Charles Winslow. *In West Mills*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.

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DE'SHAWN CHARLES WINSLOW was born and raised in Elizabeth City, NC, and in 2003 moved to Brooklyn, NY. He is a 2017 graduate of Iowa Writers' Workshop and holds a BFA in creative writing and an MA in English literature from Brooklyn College. He has received scholarships from the Napa Valley Writers' Conference and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Read an interview with him in the 2020 print issue of *NCLR*.

Continuing the Southern literary tradition of blurring whatever lines exist between family and community, between identity and place, *In West Mills* by De'Shawn Charles Winslow and *Tomorrow's Bread* by Anna Jean Mayhew each put forth compelling portraits of neighborhood communities that act as extended families to their inhabitants. The central characters of these novels find themselves consistently confronted either by their own flaws or by the flaws of society, but they rely upon their respective communities to find comfort, growth, and foundation.

Set in the rural North Carolina town of West Mills, **De'Shawn Charles Winslow's** novel *In West Mills*, based on the town of Wilson's Mills, NC, brings this notion of community as family straight to the forefront. As the title suggests, West Mills is itself the central focus of the story, which is a "family" drama in which the conflicts arise as much between neighbors as they do between relatives. The key example would be the book's two central characters: the boozy, strong-willed woman Knot and her sincere-to-a-fault neighbor Otis Lee, who seem to take on a father-daughter dynamic despite the fact that Otis Lee is only five years older than Knot. Otis Lee eagerly

and persistently attempts to fix Knot's problems for her, while Knot is determined to exercise her autonomy and navigate (or, perhaps more aptly, strong-arm through) her struggles on her own terms. However, Knot, who is estranged from her biological family, is also aware of just how much she cares for her two neighbors: "Otis Lee and Pep were the only two people who could convince her to open her door" (53). Within the first chapter, Knot wonders "why the two of them behaved so much like old people" and implicitly solidifies them within a parent-like role, or, at the very least, that of an elder relative (5). She often finds herself leaning on Otis Lee and his wife Pep for support and guidance, whether or not she actually winds up taking their advice. The result is such that, as readers, we cannot help but begin to think of Otis Lee, Pep, and Knot as family. Through that implied dynamic, and as we see how they care for each other over the course of the novel, their bond is clearly much stronger and more meaningful than simple neighborly hospitality.

To drill into this idea even further, Winslow introduces a new generation of characters over the course of the novel who are, unbeknownst to them, related to Knot. While the secrets do eventually begin to unfold, for a good portion of the novel, these

ANNA JEAN MAYHEW'S career path has taken many turns, from court reporting to opera management to medical writing. All the time she was involved in these day jobs, she was writing fiction at night and on weekends, pieces that began as short stories and became novels. For twenty-five years she taught fiction writing at Duke University Continuing Education, at the ArtsCenter in Carrboro, NC, and in her home. Her first novel, *The Dry Grass of August* (Kensington Publishing, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2012), now in its thirteenth printing, won the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction and was a finalist for the Book Award from the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance. In the fall of 2014, she was in residence for a month at Moulin à Nef Studio Center in Auvillar, France, where she worked on *Tomorrow's Bread*. Read an interview with Mayhew in *NCLR* 2013.



family members see each other only as neighbors. Similarly, Otis Lee's (presumed) mother Rose and grandmother Ma Noni both live in a small house in his backyard, ever-present but not always visible in the story. In this way, not only do neighbors function as family, but family also functions as neighbors. Throughout the novel, family and community become so conflated that, if it weren't for some of the story's bigger secrets and revelations, the differentiation would become virtually insignificant.

The strength of this communal bond seems to be the beating heart of this novel, as it works toward two of the strongest emotional aspects of the story. First, the familial connection between the people of West Mills is what endears us to them, what draws us in to their lives and compels us to empathize with their interpersonal strife. Winslow builds characters in a way that forces us to see the whole of them and to wit-

ness how they are shaped by the people they care about. On the other end, the most heart-aching moments of the novel revolve around the loss (whether from distance or death) of someone in the community. Both Otis Lee and Knot pine for the return of lost lovers, lost family, or old friends. Indeed, one of Otis Lee's most defining conflicts is his desperate desire for his sister (or so he believes) Essie to return home from New York. He expends such emotional energy trying to wrangle his family – and the people he treats as family – and keep them all in one place, that his climactic decision to cast one of them away hits all the harder.

This, too, is how Winslow dodges sentimentality in a book so steeped in internalized pain. While there are some moments in which readers will likely sense that they are *supposed* to feel sad, Winslow's ability to create complex, human characters makes their expressions of pain feel earned and real. The

two greatest moments of pain for Otis Lee are informed by pages and pages of backstory, internal conflict, and dramatic irony, such that his release is as cathartic for us as it is for him. Knot, too, undergoes multiple moments that border on the traumatic, in which she is either rejected by family or must reject her family, but our desire to understand her and how she processes pain carries us through these moments without making us feel like these events happen simply for the sake of being sad.

All of these moments of tragedy lead to the understanding that a community can't necessarily cure all pain but it can still offer the empathy and support of a family. As tumultuous as the relationships can be between the neighbors of West Mills, the care that they have for each other is as unmov- ing and unchanging as the town itself seems to be. Even as decades pass, as characters cycle in and out, West Mills seems locked within time and space, and both Knot and Otis Lee find their sense of foundation within those roots. It is perhaps because of this that both characters feel such hurt when others leave, even if they themselves are the ones who push those people away. It is as if when a neighbor or a loved one leaves, they are taking a piece of West Mills with them.

Anna Jean Mayhew's novel *Tomorrow's Bread* tackles these same core ideas but subverts them. Much of the conflict of this story is derived not from the

flaws of the central characters but from the flaws of the society in which they live. In fact, the novel's three main characters – Loraylee Hawkins, the community's pastor Ebenezer Polk, and a white woman named Persy Marshall – are all good-hearted and honest people who spend the novel battling racism and prejudice.

The story itself centers on the "urban renewal" (destruction and gentrification) of the real Charlotte neighborhood of Brooklyn, a neighborhood Mayhew says she often visited as a child. As Mayhew details in the "Q&A" at the back of *Tomorrow's Bread*, she drew upon both extensive research and personal experience in crafting this rich and sincere portrait of the destruction of a community and the issues of race and class that are inherent to such destruction.

So, while *In West Mills* asks us to examine how a community can be a foundation for its inhabitants, *Tomorrow's Bread* asks us what happens when that foundation is stripped away. The members of the Brooklyn neighborhood are as familiar to each other as family, but unlike what we see in *In West Mills*, it is not the people who leave the place in this novel but the place that leaves the people. The loss of physical nearness and connectiveness leads to the essential dissolution of this communal family.

Having moved to a new area following the destruction of Brooklyn near the end of the novel, the novel's key character (and only first-person narrator) Loraylee muses, "There's not a soul I know in this neighborhood nor anywhere close by. The more I think about how far I am from what I've always known, the worse I feel" (267).

In essence, even though Loraylee (and the other Brooklyn inhabitants) manage to settle comfortably into a new life following Brooklyn's gentrification, Mayhew leaves us with a lingering feeling of loss and injustice.

This feeling of unfairness is as potent as it is largely *because* of the sense of familial community that is baked into this story. The novel is not simply making a political statement; rather, it is casting a glaring light on the very human impact of corporate and political decisions. Beyond noting that gentrification displaces minority communities, *Tomorrow's Bread* stares us in the face and says, *these* are the people being displaced. Know them.

This differentiation is itself represented in the novel through the one white narrator, Persy, and her husband Blaire. Blaire is leading the charge of the urban renewal of Brooklyn, arguing for its economic and social merits, but he is entirely detached from the people his plans will affect. Persy, on the other hand, interacts with Loraylee and other Brooklyn inhabitants just enough for her to begin to empathize with them, and she subsequently

doubts and even openly pushes back against Blaire's intentions as a developer. Persy is ultimately powerless to stop him, in part due to the implicit and explicit constraints of gender roles in 1960s America. However, Persy represents in some ways the process of recognizing and repurposing one's privilege. In spite of her race privilege and whatever lingering prejudice she holds, Persy is well intentioned and thoughtful enough as a character that we are willing to follow her throughout her arc. In the end, it seems as if her arc leads her to discover what is at the heart of the novel: the humanity and unity of the people of Brooklyn and the pain being visited upon them by the destruction of all that they know.

Again, Mayhew dares us to experience the interconnected and complicated lives of these characters and *not* feel some sense of indignation at the loss of such a significant piece of their identity. Indeed, each moment of Brooklyn's destruction is overtly paired with some of these characters' most compassionate and human moments. Not only this, but the destruction



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does not happen quickly. It is drawn out, torturous, painstaking, leaving us time to ruminate over the emotional trauma taking place. The fire that leaves much of Brooklyn in ashes – the effects worsened by the lack of care and resources afforded them by the city of Charlotte – burns for hours and leads to multiple deaths. What we see as a result are the inhabitants of Brooklyn coming together, pooling resources, and caring for each other in a moment of crisis. “How could he console such a loss?” (154), Pastor Polk asks himself, but he answers his own question by literally giving the clothes off his back and opening his doors to those in need.

Later, we see bulldozers moving into Brooklyn and beginning to take down one house at a time over a period of weeks. Loraylee’s house isn’t even fully destroyed by the end of the novel. The workers begin to cut down the magnolia tree in her yard but stop halfway through due to malfunctioning equipment and plan to return the following week. In this moment, Loraylee reflects on how her live-in relatives Uncle Ray and Bibi would have reacted to the sight of such destruction, thinking, “If the house would of broken Bibi’s heart, the tree would break his” (268).

As with *In West Mills, Tomorrow’s Bread* encourages the reader not only to see the value of the parts but also the value of the sum. Yes, there is humanity within each of these characters that deserves our empathy and attention, but there is also an essence of humanity that arises only within the space of a community, of a family. ■

LOOK CLOSER, LISTEN

a review by Christie Collins

Becky Gould Gibson. *Indelible.* Broadkill River Press, 2018.

Susan Schmidt. *Let Go or Hold Fast.* Library Partners Press, 2018.

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BECKY GOULD GIBSON holds a PhD in English from UNC Chapel Hill and taught literature and writing at Guilford College in Greensboro, NC, until her retirement in 2008. Her books include *Heading Home* (Main Street Rag, 2014; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2015), winner of the 2013 Lena Shull Book Contest, and *Aphrodite’s Daughter* (Texas Review Press, 2007; reviewed in *NCLR* 2008), winner of the X.J. Kennedy Prize. She lives in Winston-Salem, NC.

Two recent collections of poems, by North Carolina poets Susan Schmidt and Becky Gould Gibson, ask readers to sit still for a moment of exploration, to look closer, to listen in for the untold story. Though quite different in their subject matters (one environmentally driven, one historical), a common thread between them seems to be a reclaiming of what’s been lost or what’s diminishing. Susan Schmidt’s *Let Go or Hold Fast* and Becky Gould Gibson’s *Indelible* are poetry collections to be read slowly. They call for annotations; they call for a reader who will look up heron species and biblical cities out of sheer curiosity, who will marvel at the splendor of these meticulously detailed poems.

In *Let Go or Hold Fast*, **Susan Schmidt** transports readers to the coastal town of Beaufort, located in the Inner Banks region of North Carolina. Winner of the 2018 Gail O’Day Poetry Award, this collection alludes to the environmental nature of its poems long before the reader turns to the first page of verse. Beyond the cover photo of the vibrant little blue herons, the book begins and ends with a three-page illustration of a heron perched on a rock, which takes flight by the third illustration. Although a minor detail, these illustrations work to glide the reader into and out of coastal Beaufort as the book begins and ends. The poet also dedicates the book to “Science, Endangered Species Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Clean Water, Clean Air, Wilderness Neighbors,” and has carefully chosen three environmentally conscious