

## ALWAYS TIMELY, NO MATTER THE TIME

a review by  
Ashley Daughtridge

Kati Gardner. *Brave Enough*.  
Flux, 2018.

David Brendan Hopes. *The Falls  
of Wyona: A Novel*. Red Hen  
Press, 2019.

**ASHLEY DAUGHTRIDGE** is an English lecturer at NC State University, where she received her graduate and undergraduate degrees. Her research interests include Southern literature, social justice literature, and YA literature.

**KATI GARDNER** is an author, actor, and Camp Sunshine volunteer who lives in Raleigh, NC. *Brave Enough* is her first novel. Flux published a sequel, *Finding Balance* in 2020.

**DAVID BRENDAN HOPES** is an actor and a Professor in the Department of English at UNC Asheville. His short story "Corin and Dorinda" won second place in the 2018 Doris Betts Fiction Prize competition and was published in *NCLR Online* 2019. His plays *Uranium 235* and *Night Music* have been performed at Asheville's Magnetic Theatre, and his latest book of poems, *Peniel*, was published by Saint Julian Press in 2017. *The Falls of Wyona*, his first novel, won the 2018 Quill Prize from Red Hen Press.

Though taking place over half a century apart, both Kati Gardner's *Brave Enough* and David Brendan Hopes's *The Falls of Wyona* upend prejudicial stigmas related to current social issues: in Gardner's novel the opioid crisis and ableism, and in Hopes's novel, homophobia, sexism, and suicide in the Bible Belt.

**Kati Gardner's *Brave Enough*** explores the tangled lives of her main characters, Davis and Cason, by paralleling their addiction recovery and cancer treatment, respectively, and juxtaposing their emotions of grief and hope to show the complexity of humanity. Faced with two seemingly impossible hurdles, Davis and Cason must navigate the stages, setbacks, and emotions that have interrupted their teenage lives. *Brave Enough* is a story of learning to cope with shattered dreams while discovering how to thrive in uncharted waters.

The novel begins with Davis Channing, who, after overcoming cancer, became addicted to the pain medication previously prescribed to him and turned to the streets for his fix once his prescription was discontinued. After a run-in with the law and a trip to rehab, he is sentenced to three hundred hours of community service at the oncology clinic where he received his cancer treatment. Trying to navigate a world of sobriety, Davis exists in a liminal space: his past life as an addict often haunts his present and future as he struggles to separate his addiction from his current identity. Amid his journey to self-discovery in the new light of sobriety, Davis finds himself falling for a new

patient at the oncology clinic, Cason Martin.

On her way to becoming a professional ballerina, Cason had her longest and most coveted dream ripped away by a cancer diagnosis. Replacing hours of sautés, piqués, and tendu effaces, Cason's new reality includes amputation, chemo, and physical therapy. While coping with her newly changed body, Cason slowly and begrudgingly discovers small windows of unexpected happiness, despite her suffering, learning that sometimes hardships have unexpected blessings. *Brave Enough* follows Cason's stages of grief as she navigates a new body, mindset, and social life, all while still pining for her original love, dance.

Paralleling Davis's addiction recovery to Cason's cancer treatment, Gardner emphasizes that human struggle is universal, although an individual's challenges may differ. Though much of the novel focuses on Davis and Cason's respective transformations in the wake of their treatments and recoveries, *Brave Enough* is also a thrilling love story of two teens who learn to lean on each other for much needed support. Gardner crafts her novel in a pattern that alternates between Davis and Cason's viewpoints, giving each their own chapters to highlight the development of their own new identities, while having the two main characters share other chapters to further intertwine their already complicated lives.

Gardner's refreshing ability to capture accurately the reality surrounding addiction and childhood cancer is no coincidence, having witnessed loved



COURTESY OF KATI GARDNER

ones grappling with sobriety and having been a childhood cancer survivor herself.<sup>1</sup> Though no two addicts or childhood cancer survivors' stories are identical, accurate representations of commonly shared experiences for both groups are crucial for inclusivity. As a young cancer survivor and amputee, Gardner sought a novel that accurately portrayed the experiences of a character with childhood cancer and an amputation. Finding no such book inspired her to create her own authentic story. Though the novel is not autobiographical, it provides the representation Gardner yearned for as a young reader.

While Gardner does not shy away from portraying the uncontrollable cravings that still plague recovering addicts, even months after beginning their journey of sobriety, by showing Davis's complex character through small moments of kindness, she also emphasizes that his addiction is not synonymous with his identity. Gardner similarly stresses the

importance of Cason's struggle to maintain her sense of self in a body that does not initially feel like her own, all while navigating a world of new challenges. Summoning empathy from readers, Gardner exposes society's tendency to judge addicts and to disregard the disabled. Gardner's captivating storytelling and vivid imagery invite readers to submerge themselves in a story of perseverance, hope, and self-discovery, witnessing two lost characters learning to be brave and learning to be enough.

**David Brendan Hopes's *The Falls of Wyona*** illustrates that the peaceful simplicity of Southern tradition is often undercut by the South's frequent resistance to differences. Though set in the wake of World War II, Hopes provides a still-relevant warning against remaining too ingrained in tradition and ignorance. Readers can easily draw comparisons between prejudices projected upon the LGBTQ+

community then and now. By portraying the difficulties of navigating homosexuality in the Bible Belt and the consequences of rejecting otherness, Hopes reminds readers how far our society still has to go to evolve in the name of social justice.

Narrated from the point of view of Arden forty years after the events of the story, *The Falls of Wyona* captures the familiar lure of long teenage days full of adventure, exploration, and the sweet taste of freedom. Three long-time friends – Arden, Vince, and Tilden – discover the town's forbidden falls as a rite of passage, soon understanding why the town's adults kept the location a secret. With tragedies occurring regularly, the boys find that there may be more to the falls than initially perceived. Throughout the years spent on the banks of the falls, the boys venture down their own paths of self-discovery, learning to navigate the instincts that come with maturing emotions.



PHOTOGRAPH BY HERBERT RESPESS, IV

<sup>1</sup> Michelle Leonard, "Interview with Kati Gardner, Author of *Brave Enough*," *The Winged Pen* 13 Aug. 2018: [web](#).

ABOVE Kati Gardner reading at Quail Ridge Books in Raleigh, NC, 21 Aug. 2018

ABOVE David Brendan Hopes reading his second place Doris Betts Fiction Prize story at Malaprop's in Asheville, NC, 3 Feb. 2019

Though the novel revolves around the whole friend group, narrator Arden's best friend Vince claims the novel's primary focus. Vince Jr. aspires to be Vince Sr.'s perfect son: an All-American boy, a man's man, tough, rowdy, popular, and definitely not gay. Though Vince does his best to fulfill his father's legacy and honor his name, his true self begs to breathe. Being his father's son and the high school football star is only part of his complex identity. Vince, much to his father's dismay, also sings in talent shows, explores the enticing forest surrounding the forbidden falls with friends, and realizes he is gay when he meets newcomer and outcast Glen.

Glen, an out-of-place kid who was "citized or sissified or something I couldn't put my finger on" (11), quickly becomes the center of Vince's infatuation. Equipped with promises of forever, campfire cuddling, love letters, and tapping on windows after dark, the two young boys dive headfirst into romance. However, without a framework for understanding their attraction, such desires are met with unintended, deadly consequences. *The Falls of Wyona* paints a bleak picture of 1940s America's perception of homosexuality, especially in the South. In a society where gender roles are so deeply ingrained

that any deviation jeopardizes one's reputation and renders one a "homo," Vince and Glen's only option is to conceal their relationship, but when Vince's father discovers the truth, Vince is forced to choose between his two separate lives.

A coming-of-age LGBTQ+ novel, *The Falls of Wyona* navigates Vince and Glen's unfamiliar feelings of love and lust in a homophobic town. Despite their many flaws, the people of Wyona see the community as tight-knit as family. When a community member is missing or in physical distress, the town reacts without hesitation, proving their fierce loyalty to their people. Still, the community falls short in their ability to accept those they don't understand. *The Falls of Wyona* seems to warn against otherness in the smalltown South, with nearly every outcast meeting a tragic ending. The repeated occurrences of bullying, homophobia, and sexism create an environment that breeds ignorance and deteriorates victims' mental health, often resulting in tragedy for the outcasts of Wyona.

Other instances of outcasting include town members who were morphed into outsiders by the war. Taking place on the heels of World War II, many young men have returned from service with no basis for navigating their PTSD and with feel-

ings of displacement. Soldiers were commonly met with a general ignorance about their experiences and a lack of assistance with transitioning back into civilian life. Some soldiers successfully reintegrated themselves into society, while others struggled with displacement and otherness. Either way, "they were sad, and all the more so because for the sadness there was no adequate explanation" (84–85). Hopes brings to our attention societal shortcomings regarding the lack of mental health support for men, veterans specifically, leading readers to make connections to the defects in the support provided to the same population today.

Hopes's background as a playwright and poet is easily detectable in *The Falls of Wyona's* endless pages of lyrical prose, each line crafted with careful attention to detail, allowing readers to submerge themselves in each meticulously captured moment. When asked in an interview, "Do you think of style when you write?" Hopes replied, "My ear does. It's all music to me. If the line doesn't sound right, I change it."<sup>2</sup> With delicate, yet thrilling music being the closest comparison to Hopes's prose, *The Falls of Wyona* whisks readers away on a tragic, heartfelt journey of young love and forbidden desire. ■

**NORTH CAROLINA WRITERS:** Submit your books to the annual North Carolina book awards, given by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association and affiliates. Find eligibility and submission guidelines [here](#). Due annually on July 15.

<sup>2</sup> Geosi Gyasi, "Interview with American Writer, David Brendan Hopes," *Geosi Reads* 14 Nov. 2014: [web](#).