

## THEY'RE DOING EVERYTHING THEY CAN, EVERYTHING THEY KNOW TO DO

a review by Heather Bell Adams

Meagan Lucas. *Here in the Dark*. Shotgun Honey Books, 2023.

A lifelong North Carolinian, **HEATHER BELL ADAMS** is the author of two novels, *Maranatha Road* (West Virginia University Press, 2017; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019), winner of the IPPY Gold Medal for the Southeast Region, and *The Good Luck Stone* (Haywire Books 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* Fall 2022), winner of the Next Generation Book Awards' Best Historical Novel. Her work has won the Doris Betts Fiction Prize, Rose Post Creative Nonfiction Award, Carrie McCray Literary Award, and James Still Fiction Prize, and appears in *Raleigh Review*, *Still: The Journal*, *The Thomas Wolfe Review*, *Atticus Review*, *Broad River Review*, *NCLR*, and elsewhere. She has served as North Carolina's 2022 Piedmont Laureate and South Carolina's 2023 Pat Conroy Writer in Residence.

Following up on her debut novel, *Songbirds and Stray Dogs* (2019), North Carolina author Meagan Lucas has released a new short story collection, *Here in the Dark*. Lucas is a prolific writer who has published more than forty stories and essays in various literary journals. This collection is comprised of sixteen stories written over the span of several years and published in *Still: The Journal*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Cowboy Jam-boree*, *Storgy Magazine*, and other journals and anthologies. Peter Farris, author of *The Devil Himself* (2022), calls *Here in the Dark* "honest and unflinching, elegant yet brutal."\*

In these stories, Lucas pulls no punches. She is not afraid to delve into the gritty motivations of desperate criminals or probe the dark underbelly of modern society. Her protagonists, who range from law enforcement officials to prisoners, have at least one thing in common: they are women in difficult circumstances trying to do the best they can with the hand they've been dealt. For the most part, these women are down on their luck. They have suffered the loss of children, partners, and friends. In "Asylum," a young mother who has come to the US from Honduras recalls "the pale skinned agents pulling babies from her arms as their family was separated, the babies' eyes wide, their lips quivering against the stranger's polyester

uniform" (85). They are struggling with addiction. The title story begins, "It had been three months since she'd had a drink. Twelve weeks since she'd pulled smoke into her lungs. Ninety days without a needle, or a pill, or a bump" (171). Her characters are dealing with financial insecurity, in some instances living paycheck to paycheck, and in others, scrambling to find food to feed their children. When confronted with one of her children who has ripped her pants, the protagonist in "Porch Light Salvation," known only as "the mother," tries not to show her annoyance: "More demands on her limited resources, the need to try to fix the pants, the inevitable need to ask him for money to buy new ones. She could feel his fingertips pressing into the tender flesh on the back of her arm as he asked why she needed more money" (139).

In "Picking the Carcass," the main character is jealous of those who have gas in their car, clean clothes, food, and drugs. "She [can't] remember the last time she drank a beer in a bar" (18). When she has a little extra money for once, she relishes using cash, instead of SNAP, at the Food Lion and feeds her daughters store-brand mac and cheese "with actual milk, not just margarine" (17).

Lucas keeps the metaphorical knife at her characters' throats. She presses them to their limits, which keeps the

tension high and the reader turning the pages. J. Todd Scott, author of *The Flock* (2022), describes Lucas's characters as "wounded but surviving." If the subject matter sounds dark, rest assured that the writing is sophisticated and inventive. In "Picking the Carcass," readers may be surprised at what the protagonist discovers inside the carcass of a raccoon. Throughout the collection, the clever plots ensure that these stories have the capacity to startle the reader in the best of ways. This works particularly well when, instead of resigned to passivity, the protagonists channel their anger at the world into some sort of action. For example, in "Glass Houses," the narrator, despite being irritated with her judgmental neighbors, makes a profound decision to help their child. When the main character in "Molasses in Winter" is frustrated with strangers commenting about her body, she decides to "use this anger as fuel" (118).

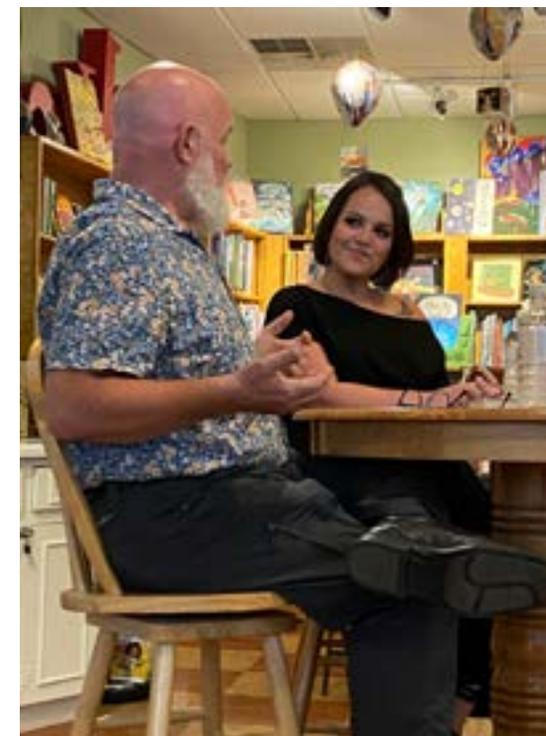
Other characters are resigned to their circumstances or hiding from the truth. "The Only Comfort," perhaps the most poignant story in the collection, explores the rawness of grief. From the beginning, Lucas sets the scene by placing the protagonist on the deck with snow up to her knees and her dead husband's sleeping bag draped over her shoulders. By the story's end, she is back on the deck where she started. But now she's

huddled inside the sleeping bag – and she's going to destroy a piece of evidence she wishes didn't exist. The narrator's ultimate refusal to confront the real story behind her husband's death leaves the reader to conclude that the lie of delusion is the only comfort she can find.

While the settings of the stories range from western North Carolina to Michigan, they are rooted in rural America. Lucas injects political commentary without interfering with the narrative flow. In "Voluntary Action," the protagonist believes no one cares about "the poor drowning in their own vomit, or stroking out in their trailers" until "it's a crisis because some kids with money, with daddies who wear white shirts and ties, kids with futures, are dying" (4). To put *Here in the Dark* in a larger context, Lucas is doing with the short story form what North Carolina author David Joy does in his novels, particularly *When These Mountains Burn* (2020). "Buttons," one of the few stories told from a child's per-

spective, is reminiscent of the chilling ending of Doris Betts's "The Spider Gardens of Madagascar" (in Betts's 1973 collection, *Beasts of the Sothern Wild & other stories*).

The last line of the first story in Lucas's collection sets the tone: "I did everything I could, everything I knew to do" (10). With *Here in the Dark*, Lucas brings to life women who are trying desperately to save anything that is salvageable. Reiterating this theme, George Singleton describes the collection as featuring "strong, desperate, determined female protagonists, all fighting their good fights." ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTY ALEXANDER HALLBERG

**MEAGAN LUCAS** is the author of the award-winning novel, *Songbirds and Stray Dogs* (Main Street Rag Press, 2019; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021), which was chosen to represent North Carolina in the Library of Congress 2022 Route 1 Reads program and won Best Debut at the 2020 Indie Book Awards. She has been nominated for the Pushcart, Best of the Net, Derringer, and Canadian Crime Writer's Award of Excellence, and she won the 2017 Scythe Prize for Fiction. She teaches creative writing at Robert Morris University and in the Great Smokies Writing Program at UNC Asheville and is the Editor-in-Chief of *Reckon Review*. Born and raised on a small island in northern Ontario, she now lives in the mountains of western North Carolina.

ABOVE Meagan Lucas with another North Carolina writer, Nathan Ballingrud at her book launch, Asheville, NC, Aug. 2023

\* This and other quotations by other readers are from the book blurbs on the publisher's website.