

Snake in the Grass

a review by Barbara Bennett

Minrose Gwin. *Beautiful Dreamers*. Hub City Press, 2024.

BARBARA BENNETT is a Professor of English at NC State University. Her books include *Comic Vision, Female Voices* (Louisiana State University Press, 1998), *Understanding Jill McCorkle* (University of South Carolina Press, 2000), *Soul of a Lion* (National Geographic Books, 2010), and *Smoke Signals from Samarcand: The 1931 Reform School Fire and its Aftermath* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018). Read her interview with Jill McCorkle and Lee Smith in *NCLR* 2016, her essay on Jill McCorkle's *Ferris Beach* in *NCLR* 2006, her essay on Daniel Wallace's *Big Fish* in *NCLR Online* 2019, and her creative nonfiction essay in *NCLR* 2022. She also reviews regularly for *NCLR*.

MINROSE GWIN has been a writer all her working life, starting out as a newspaper and wire service reporter and working in Mobile, Atlanta, Nashville, and Knoxville. She has taught as a professor at universities around the country, most recently at UNC Chapel Hill. She has spent many summers leading creative writing workshops at the University of New Mexico Writers' Conference in Taos and Santa Fe. Her books include *Black and White Women of the Old South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature* (University of Tennessee Press, 1985); *The Woman in the Red Dress: Gender, Space, and Reading* (University of Illinois Press, 2002); a memoir, *Wishing for Snow* (Harper Collins, 2011), and *Remembering Medgar Evers: Writing the Long Civil Rights Movement* (University of Georgia Press, 2013).

After retiring from a long and distinguished career as a scholar of Southern literature and women's literature, Minrose Gwin turned her energies to writing fiction. From what she's written so far – *The Queen of Palmyra* (2010), *Promise* (2018), and *The Accidentals* (2019) – it's clear that she should have been giving us the gift of her storytelling all along. Now, with her newest novel, *Beautiful Dreamers*, Gwin tells us another compelling tale of family, secrets, and betrayal in the Deep South, couched in the era of Civil Rights.

The story is told through the eyes of Memory Feather, decades into the future from the main action in 1953, allowing her – and the readers – to see clearly what she couldn't see as a child. Memory – or Mem, as she is called – is “unusual.” She was born “blue and missing two fingers on [her] left hand, the tiny hand itself as withered and twisted as an old grapevine” (4). She also can hear things other people cannot: animals and even plants converse with her. But all the main characters are “othered” in some way. Mem's mother Virginia was abandoned by her war hero husband for a “hussy” in France, and she finds herself the only divorcee in Belle Cote, MS. Mem describes her mother as a “burned tree after a forest fire, sap-hardened on the outside, the inside hollowed out” (51). And Mac, Virginia's childhood friend, is – as they say in 1953 – “light in the wing tips – a fairy or a flit, or worse” (4).

Despite living on the fringes of their small society, together the three of them make up a “family.” They live in Mac's sprawling house on the Gulf Coast during a time “before the high-rise casinos . . . before ‘Hurricanes Betsy and Camille,’ before Dupont began polluting the water, the land, and all its wildlife (17). In short, a time of seeming innocence in a place Mem's grandfather proclaims as “Paradise” (18).

But we all know the story of Paradise. We all know it can't last – and we know why. Enter Tony Amato, the proverbial serpent in Eden, the snake in the grass. In the Garden of Eden, Satan must have appeared as a beautiful snake; otherwise, Eve wouldn't have been attracted to him and let him seduce her into breaking the one law God had given her. He must have used smooth and slick words to convince her he had only her well-being in mind. He must have appeared as a friend before he took what was most valuable to her.

So it goes with Tony, a beautiful young man who shows up and becomes Mac's “friend.” When Memory first sees a portrait of him – before his arrival – she is “drawn to him, yet repelled, as if he were a beautiful snake” (21). She admits he has “a certain alchemy. How do I explain the way I hated and distrusted him one minute and adored him the next?” (108). His smile is “illuminating” with an “otherworldliness that radiated

from him” (80), and both Mac and Virginia “seemed to have been struck blind by Tony, as if they had looked too long in the sun” (183).

Because Memory is writing this as her future self, and the readers are made aware that something terrible is going to happen, reading this book is like watching a horror film and finding yourself yelling at the actors on the screen, “Don't go into the basement!” Yet, we know they will. If they didn't, there would be no story. We would leave the theater feeling cheated. And Minrose Gwin is not about to cheat us out of a captivating story. Once the snake appears, the plot is put in motion, and it can't be stopped. As Memory discerns wisely, “Some mice, I've observed, seem mesmerized by the cat that stalks them” (102). And there *is* a cat in this story – a wise cat aptly named after the goddess of wisdom and defensive warfare, Minerva, who speaks to Memory. Minerva is a delightful addition to this tale of disruption. She warns Memory several times that “*Things are going to get much worse*” (206), but of course it's too late to stop the cascading events. The snake is already in the grass, and Paradise is at risk.

If this narrative was all that Gwin gave us, it would be enough, but she offers more. The novel is set against the years of Civil Rights protests and virulent homophobic rhetoric on a national level. In the heart of the segregated South, Mac – already seen as outside the realm of proper society – fights for the rights of others who are tortured just because of who they are. We get glimpses of



COURTESY OF MINROSE GWIN

the fight going on and we realize that our main characters are only the tip of what is considered “other” in the South of 1953. And Mac himself is often the target of his own brand of prejudice. His art studio is graffitied with vulgar epithets, and he is attacked more than once, even in New Orleans, where being gay was slightly more accepted than in Belle Cote.

The consequences of being the other runs throughout this compelling novel about beautiful dreamers who imagine a better world than they live in. As Memory observes, “we beautiful dreamers are frail creatures” (282), much like the graceful but

fragile birds that populate the story, which Memory observes with such interest and dedication. Indeed, birds are lovely things, but they can be killed or maimed so easily. They can break their wings and be unable to fly, leaving themselves defenseless.

Deftly written and beautiful to the ear, *Beautiful Dreamers* is a story of Paradise that is at once timeless and timely. What a lovely world we have been given, and yet we have destroyed Paradise with prejudice and hate, with pollution and greed. This Gwin novel is a tale worth reading and considering long after we have finished the final page. ■