

## GOOD IS CIRCUMSTANTIAL

a review by Jon Kesler

Halle Hill. *Good Women: Stories*. Hub City Press, 2023

**JON KESLER** is an organization development consultant, retired Air Force Officer, and aspiring author working on his first novel, based loosely on the letters his father wrote to his mother during World War II. He lives in Greensboro, NC, and has begun volunteering regularly to review for *NCLR*.

**HALLE HILL** is a graduate of Maryville College and received an MFA in Creative Writing from Savannah College of Art and Design in 2020. She is the winner of the 2020 *Oxford American* Debut Fiction Prize and the 2021 Crystal Wilkinson Creative Writing Prize, as well as a finalist for the 2021 ASME Award for Fiction. Her short stories have been published in *Joyland*, *new Limestone Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Ursa Short Fiction*, and *The Oxford American*. She lives in Winston-Salem, NC, and is a new member of the North Carolina Writers' Network's Board of Trustees.

Through her recent release, *Good Women*, Halle Hill introduces twelve women experiencing varying degrees of change in their lives. The stories of the twelve are as different as they are engaging. The themes woven into the stories give life to the ways in which these women go about changing their fates, while demonstrating their core goodness, even under the most trying of circumstances. Hill pulls the reader into the lives of these twelve women and entices us to consider them for who they are deep down and to the circumstances that brought them to the places in which they stand.

Clearly the reference to "good" in the title is circumstantial, the "good" often lying beneath the surface, masked by scrupulous undertakings intended to improve their lot in life. At the other end of the spectrum, at least one of Hill's characters appears to be too good for her own good, opening the door to be taken advantage of as a victim of her own generosity. In "Seeking Arrangements," Hill's unnamed, gritty and downtrodden, nearly twenty-eight-year-old protagonist, self-described as "Me – a college dropout, broke, sleeping on an air mattress at my sister Sheena's house, helping with her girls" (2), travels with her much older and health-stricken sugar daddy, Ron, to meet his mother in Florida. Upon departure this protagonist has yet to find any evidence of the so-called millions Ron claims to be worth but joins him on this life adventure just the same. She

cares for Ron, not so much in the loving sense of the physical relationship they share, but more in the way of a caretaker, being sure he has his medications, that he is comfortable on the bus, that he knows she will put on a good act for his mother. All the while, she is ready to bolt and pursue her desire to be anywhere else.

In a more complex story, "Keeping Noisettes," Hill introduces three characters, all of whom are central, thanks to Hill's apt descriptions of each. One of the three, Lucille, somewhat contentedly makes her way through life with "a feeling things were going well enough" (153). The nurturing Lucille is the character who may be too good for her own good. Independently raising her sixteen-year-old daughter, Mary, she has a history of opening her house to others in need. In this case, the third main character, Janet, appears at Lucille's door on a dark, rainy night, first asking to use the phone and then staying on for the night that turns into months.

Given Hill's description of the chameleon-like Janet, it is easy for the reader to see her as a drifter and grifter, even though she alludes to a loving and caring family somewhere. The reader is also introduced to the good in her as she provides Mary with some desperately needed money to fund her way out of the Carolinas and gives Lucille tips on growing her Noisettes. Mary rolls through the story as a supporting character while working to fulfill her desire for something more,

which in her case is an education at Howard University, while reminding Lucille, "Mom, you're not everyone's savior" (157). Hill also develops a bond among the three through their mutual disdain of Carla Boatright, a busy-body neighbor. In this way, Hill demonstrates the complexities of the characters and leaves the reader wanting to know the rest of each of their stories.

Hill has a way of putting the reader into the scene with distinctive portrayals of sights, sounds, and smells. In "The Truth About Gators," she describes a stabbing committed by the story's protagonist, Nicki:

When I first saw the dandruff flakes, I was sure he'd wash his hands, sure he'd scrape the gunk out somehow. The white, cottage cheese-looking shit sat thick on the underside of his long, rounded nail.

But he didn't scrape. He didn't dust his hands off on his pants. He reached over the grill with his bare hands and flipped the meat, then he licked his lips at me.

So, I lost it. Clawed an ice pick from an Igloo cooler and made a few indentations on him. I don't remember much after that. But now I see Rabbi Kadens. (45)

Hill's description puts the reader inside Nicki's head to better understand the reason she is going through therapy for assaulting this older man who had molested her as a child.

In "Skin Hunger," Hill helps us see life through the perspective of Shauna, who married into a well-to-do white enclave and was continually treated as an outsider through an ongoing series of painfully inappropriate



COURTESY OF HALLE HILL

interactions. "When his mother asked me to throw away her dinner plate for her, Allie cleared her throat and said, 'Mom, this is Shauna, my friend.' My future mother-in-law smiled without apologizing and told me how much she liked my hair. . . . 'I like this style best on you brown girls'" (80–81). That is only one in a series of racially sensitive anecdotes in the story. In "Skin Hunger," Hill brings out the distinctions between what is said within a closed circle and how it is perceived as the circle expands. Without shaming, Hill

helps to accentuate that certain things are wrong no matter who is in the circle.

In *Good Women*, Halle Hill has captured fictional moments in time experienced by twelve Southern women of color that reflect the realities many face in their daily lives. These stories are gritty and real. They inspire the reader to reflect not only on her characters, but also upon themselves, how they act, how they perceive others, and how they stand up for and stand by others. ■