

COMMUNITY AS WITNESS IN WEST MILLS

a review by Kristina L. Knotts

De'Shawn Charles Winslow. *Decent People*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023.

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DE'SHAWN CHARLES WINSLOW was born and raised in Elizabeth City, NC, and in 2003 moved to Brooklyn, NY. A 2017 graduate of Iowa Writers' Workshop, Winslow holds a BFA in creative writing and an MA in English literature from Brooklyn College. His first novel, *In West Mills* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2020), received an American Book Award and was a Center for Fiction First Novel Prize winner.

Decent People is De'Shawn Charles Winslow's second novel and a strong follow-up to his award-winning first novel, *In West Mills*. Both novels are set in the small fictional town of West Mills in eastern North Carolina, close to the Virginia border, and many of the characters populating it emerge in this latest work. While his first novel spans several decades, *Decent People* takes place in a much shorter time span, March 1976.

One of the compelling features of Winslow's characters in both of his novels is their uniqueness. Both novels feature women whose outlook and perception of those around them are unconventional. His characters recall Toni Morrison's Sula, the free-spirited protagonist from the 1973 novel of the same name who became a community pariah for violating gender and sexual norms, much as the main character from *In West Mills*, Azalea "Knot" Center, does. Knot is independent and intelligent, though at times self-destructive. A heavy drinker, a devoted reader, and an independent thinker, she is, above all, an iconoclast. Her platonic friendships with men in the novel are the kind of relationships not often portrayed in fiction. In *Decent People*, the main protagonist, Jo Wright, shares similar characteristics, minus the drinking. Jo, like Knot, is an intelligent and self-sufficient woman who does not take no for an answer and is a fervent defender and fiercely protective of her brother Herschel, who is gay.

When *Decent People* begins, Jo, a West Mills native, has returned to her hometown roots after many years in New York City. Back in West Mills, Jo is ready to settle into retirement with her fiancé, Lymp Seymore, and reconnect with the small town she left as a child. Her plans for a calm retirement, though, do not last long. The novel's plot quickly settles into the mystery revealed in the opening chapter: Lymp's half-siblings (Marian, Marva, and Lazarus Harmon) have been murdered, and Lymp is a suspect. Frustrated with the local police's efforts to track down the Harmons' killer or to aggressively take up other leads, Jo takes it upon herself to talk to other people in West Mills to see what evidence she can uncover. As she talks to those who reportedly feuded with the Harmons, the narrative perspective shifts to other townspeople who are also suspects. As Jo works to find answers to absolve her fiancé, incriminating information emerges from many different characters, including Lymp. Besides Jo, the novel reveals the stories of Eunice Loving (whom readers may remember from *In West Mills*), Savannah Russet, and Ted Temple. All were witnessed arguing with Marian or Marva Harmon prior to their murder. All had reasons to confront them.

As the reader learns more about the various characters and their stories, the narrative reveals the complicated history of West Mills. We learn about gay family members fleeing the



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small Southern town for the North to live a freer life. Multiple white and Black characters formed relationships at great physical, social, and emotional risk, as did those in same-sex relationships. Past recollections and current scenes show policing that favors West Mills's white and well-off citizens. The novel's title can be read straightforwardly and sardonically: it nods to the characters who are kind and decent, but there are a fair share of characters who think highly of themselves yet prove cruel and self-serving. Only by delving into the stories of the various characters are the complexities revealed and the mystery of the Harmons' deaths solved.

An interesting facet of Winslow's fiction is his portrayal of parents' concern about their children growing up in a community where racism, sexism, and homophobia are casually expressed. *In West Mills* shows Knot yearning for parental support as an adult even as she must make difficult decisions about herself as a potential parent. In *Decent People*, parents make misguided decisions that have profound effects on their

children. The parents, whether it's Eunice or Savannah, want to shield their children from problems, though they don't always do it for the right reasons or in the right way. The reader sees the heartbreaking effect one mother's treatment of her gay son has on him when Eunice takes her young son, La'Roy, to Marian Harmon, a pediatrician, "to have the gay removed." Eventually, she recognizes her mistake "was thinking her son needed fixing" (58). The characters have flaws, but some wish to improve and demonstrate regret. There is hope for change with the younger generation in West Mills who see the limits of the older generation. Nate, Lymp's son, admonishes his father when he carelessly refers to Knot and her friend Valley as "winos" (32). These kinds of moments draw the reader in and make the community of West Mills more compelling.

Although *Decent People* is set in 1976, so many of the novel's themes and conflicts continue to plague America today: systemic racism, homophobia, and biased policing. The novel explores the staggering impact

of racism on its inhabitants. For example, Savannah, a white woman, and her husband, a Black man, had to leave West Mills in the early 1960s to avoid harassment and potential violence. Besides the racism they face, several characters who are gay must confront the severe homophobia around them. In both novels, these gay citizens of Winslow's fictional community— young, middle-aged, and older — certainly could be the centerpiece of future fiction.

Decent People shows there are many more potential plotlines to pursue should Winslow continue to write about the West Mills community he has created. Certainly, the Harmons' past as well as their family dynamics presents possibilities: Why did they leave for the north and then return to West Mills? Why are Marva and Lazarus subservient to Marian?

In both *Decent People* and *In West Mills*, the Black characters, fearing violence, leave West Mills. What makes Winslow's fiction still so affirming are characters like Jo (and Knot from *In West Mills*) who protest the discrimination that their family members and friends face and envision a more inclusive world. Winslow's storytelling here shows ample ability and imagination for further exploration of this small but complex North Carolina community. Winslow's *Decent People* takes up Morrison's claim to see characters that represent all of us, something both Knot and Jo would appreciate. ■