

GROWING GRACEFULLY

a review by Amber Knox

Karen Jones. *The Summer of Grace*. Brother Mockingbird, 2022.

AMBER KNOX is a graduate student at East Carolina University, where she works as an *NCLR* Editorial Assistant. She has an Associate in Arts degree from Pitt Community College as well as a BA in English from ECU.

KAREN JONES's books include *Death for Beginners* (Quill Driver Books, 2010). She is a retired broadcast journalist who also spent ten years as a public school educator and has taught writing workshops and seminars at Louisiana State University, Austin Peay University, and Old Dominion University as well as writing courses at the University of Richmond and Christopher Newport University.

ABOVE Queen Street looking North, Kinston, NC, circa 1953



COURTESY OF DURHAM BARBOUR COLLECTION OF NC POSTCARDS (POSTAL COLLECTION PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES, WILSON LIBRARY, UNC CHAPEL HILL)

In her newest novel, *The Summer of Grace*, Karen Jones takes her readers back to 1950s America to explore the complex relationships within a Southern family and the challenges, both internal and external, that they face together. This Young Adult, coming-of-age novel follows ten-year-old Gracie over the course of a summer spent on her great-grandmother's farm in North Carolina. Gracie's visit is fraught with familial and social tensions as she and her cousin attempt to overcome the histories that haunt them and uncover the mysteries surrounding their family. In *The Summer of Grace*, Jones crafts a heartbreaking and heartwarming story about the traumas of the past and the strength of family.

Jones makes it clear from the beginning of the novel that Gracie does not have a close relationship with her parents. She spends most of her time trying to avoid catching her high-strung mother's attention. And while her father seems to be concerned about his wife's mental state, his daughter's needs do not receive the same care. Gracie is very aware that "There was enough trouble around here without me having a problem too. Momma's spells took up most of the air" (6).

Unable to rely on either of her parents, Gracie mostly keeps to herself, confiding only in her faithful dog Brown Hound.

When Sissy's condition seems to worsen, Gracie and Brown Hound are sent away to stay with her father's relatives for the summer. While her grandmother, Miss Emily, and great-grandmother, Granny Jane, are practically strangers to Gracie when she arrives, she soon finds a new home with them and her cousin Jane. The two girls spend their days exploring the North Carolina countryside, swimming in the nearby river, and scaring each other with tales of the conjure woman and the local ghost.

The relationships Gracie develops in North Carolina are vastly different from what she has come to expect at home. Miss Emily and Granny Jane often show concern not only for the girls' safety but also for their happiness. Aunt Martha and Uncle Ben enjoy spending time with them and regularly invite Gracie and Jane to their house in Kingston for the weekend. Brown Hound is no longer Gracie's only confidant as Jane becomes a constant presence at her side. Perhaps most impactful for Gracie is the realization that she now has people

in her life who are willing to stand up for her: "Daddy always gave up. But Uncle Ben didn't give up. He just kept at it until he won. He'd said that it was important to me, and he made Aunt Martha see that" (113). Under this care and attention Gracie "blossomed like a flower in the sun" (265). She quickly comes to love her extended family, and, as the summer passes, her fear of her parents sending her away becomes fear of being taken back.

Gracie is not the only character dealing with complicated feelings about her family. Her cousin Jane lives on the farm with Miss Emily and Granny Jane and seems to be happy and thriving. However, not everyone in the family is content with Jane's upbringing. Gracie and Jane's aunt Viola makes her disapproval very clear throughout the course of the novel. This family conflict quickly spills out into the community, getting Aunt Viola's friends and the local preacher involved and placing Jane and Gracie in a precarious position.

The girls also find themselves entangled in the complex social tensions surrounding the family's African American housekeeper, Marcell. Marcell has had

a long and troubled history that some members of Gracie's family and most of their community would rather not acknowledge. She also has an intense dislike of dogs that quickly puts her in conflict with Gracie and Brown Hound. But Gracie and Jane's relationship with Marcell evolves over the course of the novel. During an unauthorized visit to Marcell's house, Gracie and Jane are startled to discover "Marcell ate food, mended holes in her clothes, and read books. Marcell suddenly became a person" (71). Gracie and Jane also begin to uncover hints about Marcell's past and the mystery that still haunts her and their family. Over time, the girls see Marcell as less of an adversary and more of a companion and ally against the influences of the outside world. Like them, Marcell suffered tragic and life-altering events in her childhood and much of her life has been directed by forces beyond her control. As Granny Jane says, "Marcell's got too many ghosts in her head. She was just a child when it happened. And she saw it. And she still has scars" (62). Convinced that solving the mystery of Marcell's past will resolve their family's issues and finally bring Marcell peace from the "ghosts

in her head" (62), the two girls dig into the complex history of their community and their family, determined to uncover the truth before the summer ends.

In *The Summer of Grace*, Karen Jones addresses issues of family, race, and community through the eyes of two young girls just learning about the world outside of the familiar boundaries of their childhood existence. The history and relationships that have led to the small, makeshift family that populates Granny Jane's farm are at times heartbreaking, but in each other these characters manage to find comfort and a chance to heal. Despite the societal and familial expectations that try to dictate their lives, Gracie and Jane are given the freedom and support to grow into themselves through their relationships with others. Karen Jones gives her readers the same opportunity through introducing these complex issues in a heartwarming story about family. Gracie and Jane's childhood adventures and the relationships they form with the adults in this novel offer a comforting and nostalgic storyline to offset the trauma and injustice of Marcell's story without distracting from its importance. ■

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

NORTH CAROLINA BOOK AWARDS

managed by *NCLR*

Help us to

"preserve and promote the state's rich literary history."

Nomination guidelines [here](#)