

## SWAMP GIRLS IN TROUBLE: CLASS, RACE, AND THE PATRIARCHY IN THE PROHIBITION-ERA SOUTH

a review by Dennis R. Turner, Jr.

Kelly Mustian. *The Girls in the Stilt House*. Sourcebooks, 2021.

**DENNIS R. TURNER, JR.**, is from Oak City, NC, and earned his BA and MA in English from East Carolina University. While teaching in his alma mater's English Department, he served as Submissions Assistant for *NCLR*. He now teaches at Pitt Community College in Greenville, NC.

**KELLY MUSTIAN** grew up in Natchez, MI, and in 2023 received the Mississippi Author Award for Fiction. She now lives with her family near the foothills of North Carolina. Her work has appeared in numerous literary journals and commercial magazines, and she is a past recipient of a Regional Artist Grant from the North Carolina Arts and Science Council. *The Girls in the Stilt House*, her debut novel, is a *USA Today* and SIBA bestseller and was shortlisted for the 2022 Crook's Corner Book Prize.

OPPOSITE Kelly Mustian at Main Street Books for Independent Bookstore Day, Davidson, NC, 2022

The recent success of Delia Owens's *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) has sent publishers looking for similarly-minded tales of low-bred but beautiful Southern damsels in distress, a genre of Southern potboilers that can playfully be labelled "Swamp Girls in Trouble." Into this wake comes author Kelly Mustian, a former Mississippi native now living in the foothills of North Carolina who was a recipient of the North Carolina Arts and Science Council's Regional Artist Project Grant, delivering us *The Girls in the Stilt House*, a Southern-fried yarn set in her beloved Mississippi Trace during Prohibition and Jim Crow. The story concerns two young women from the wrong side of the poverty line but different sides of the color line as they contend with domineering, corrupt men, rich and poor, while attempting to succeed in or break free from this genteel agrarian society that hides an underbelly of bootlegging and deeply ingrained class structures. Through this reluctant partnership of women bound by their misfortunes and needs, themes of race, class, and gender inequality are explored, but Mustian does not forget she is telling an old-fashioned Southern crime story.

The story unfolds over the better part of a year in 1923 and 1924. Structurally, it begins with a prologue in which the two main characters are in the midst of disposing of a body in an old Confederate tomb in the woods. From there, the story is divided into three parts, one and two showing how each of the girls gets to this moment and part three detailing the events in the aftermath. Poor, wayward Ada Morgan, a white sixteen-year-

old, comes home to the Trace disgraced and unknowingly pregnant a year after running off with a young man who promised love and adventure but dealt her heartbreak and destitution, and she must deal with the petty cruelty of her drunken, abusive father upon her return. Meanwhile, seventeen-year-old Matilda Patterson, daughter of a local Black sharecropper employed by a prominent white landowning family who dabble in bootlegging as well, has had a happier homelife but longs to escape the limitations and perils of the Jim Crow South, though events have caused her to go into hiding. Circumstances thrust these two young women from the same town but different worlds together under the same roof of the stilt house at the edge of the swamp (hence the title of the novel), and an uneasy but necessary partnership forms as they learn to fend for themselves and face a slew of dangerous, unscrupulous men in their paths.

These two protagonists, Ava and Matilda, though both in precarious positions that cause them to rely on each other, have different obstacles facing them, and the dangers they face intersect their lives in interesting ways. Ada's big problem early on is that she is naive and helpless. Lured away by a charming young fiddle player a year prior, she comes back to the Trace cast off, pregnant, and looking to be accepted back by her callous father, Virgil Morgan. In flashback, her former flame says of her naivete before leaving her: "But being here all these months, this whole year, I'm seeing things with us different. It's almost like you're my kid, if you can understand



COURTESY OF KELLY MUSTIAN

what I mean. The responsibility of it. I'm not ready for that. I don't know as I'll ever be" (97–98). She is so naive about the ways of the world that she does not realize she is pregnant. Her father's assessment of her guilelessness is blunt: "Too god-damned dumb to know," he said, shaking his head. "Too mortal dumb" (54). She does not know how to do anything and men do not give her much respect or credit, so at first things look bleak for her, especially since she is not a good judge of character when it comes to men.

By contrast, Matilda is from a loving family and is a self-sufficient, resourceful young woman. Her big problem is that she is a Black woman coming of age in Mississippi in the 1920s when Jim Crow is in full swing, limiting her opportunities and her social standing in the eyes of society as well as her credibility in the eyes of the law. She has a very sober view of her environment, as seen here:

Matilda asked herself then how anyone – anyone – could be against an anti-lynching law. But there were people, she knew, who would resist any law handed down by the federal government. People who did good things, who went to church and gave

to the poor and helped their neighbors and loved their children, and at the same time would stand against making it a federal crime to hang people from trees, or beat them to death, or burn them, or douse them with acid. Year in and year out such things were happening. . . . None of it made any sense to Matilda. (117)

Matilda's view of the South is confirmed by numerous events in the story, and her social standing makes things difficult for her when she runs afoul of dangerous white men both high and low on the social hierarchy. The girls' unlikely and rickety partnership is borne out of circumstance and their personalities do not exactly mesh, at least not at first. Ada is friendly and open to Matilda, seemingly unencumbered by the prejudices of her time and place, but she is naïve and helpless, which Matilda finds aggravating, at least until Ava discovers she has a useful skill. Meanwhile, as stated before, Matilda is a practical and resourceful young woman, but she is not initially open to or trusting of Ada or anyone else but a select few from her side of the swamp, given that whites – particularly white men – are the source of her current troubles: "Until now, Matilda had made it plain that she was not open to inquiries. She had simply stepped into Ada's world without a word about whatever world she had stepped out of" (76). Their relationship is both assuaged and strained by the birth of Ada's daughter. However, in spite of their differences, each will get a chance to save the other over the course of the story, allowing for the friendship to become genuine.

The adversity these girls face is personified by the chief villains of this story, both white

men but from different ends of the social order. One antagonist is Virgil Morgan, Ada's father. Poor, white, and a native of the swamp, he is a fur trapper by trade and a regular customer of bootlegging local landowner Curtis Creedle. He likes his women, both his deceased wife and his daughter, to be subservient and fearful, and he likes the Black sharecroppers on Creedle's farm, including Matilda and her family, to know their place. Mustian describes Ada's view of her father's temperament as such:

Some might think her father wanted people to be afraid of him, she supposed, but she knew that what he really wanted was to feel like a big man. It was that need that fueled the worst in him. Her father had so mixed up respect and fear that he could not discern one from the other, and it fed some desperate thing in him when people or animals felt helpless in his presence. (35)

Virgil Morgan is man in search of someone to look down on. He is cruel to Ada and has harassed Matilda's family in the past, leading to tremendous personal upheaval for Matilda. His actions set the plot in motion.

The second major villain of the story is Frank Bowers, Curtis Creedle's conniving, opportunistic nephew, who has come to town looking to get in on his uncle's illicit liquor business. Since, in addition to farming Creedle's land, Matilda's father is a reluctant participant in Creedle's bootlegging, this puts the amoral Frank in proximity to Matilda's family. Matilda learns some things about Frank that he wants kept secret, and therein lies the conflict between them. For instance, not long after first encountering him, Matilda

catches Frank sneakily doing something he should not be doing, and Mustian describes Matilda's reaction as such:

He stood and bent to brush off his creased pants, and Matilda stopped in midstep, just as she would have if he had been a snarling dog or a rattlesnake within striking distance. He turned around and their eyes met. If looks could kill, Matilda knew, she would have been lost to the world right then. Frank's lips curled into an empty smile, and he raised the bottles over his head in an arrogant greeting. (144)

This conflict eventually draws Ada into the fray and Frank's attitude toward her is not much better. Frank is an outwardly charming and respectable but deeply amoral social climber willing to exploit any leverage he has over anyone and he epitomizes the sense of entitlement many whites had during this time.

Throughout the novel, Ada's and Matilda's relationship strains but ultimately strengthens as these two young women, thrown together by circumstance, meet challenges both mundane and perilous and work to achieve their goals of freedom and self-sufficiency. Though she couches it in a Southern crime fiction narrative, Mustian points out that though we may be different in many ways, we can get further by working together against common obstacles and enemies. Mustian's story is an ode to female grit in the face of adversity and a reminder that bygone days in the South were not so rosy if you were not white and male. ■