

"TO LOVE THE SOUTH SURGICALLY"

a review by Zackary Vernon

Mark Powell. *The Late Rebellion*. Regal House Publishing, 2024.

ZACKARY VERNON is an Associate Professor in the English Department at Appalachian State University. His research has appeared in several scholarly publications, including *Journal of American Studies*, *Southern Cultures*, and *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. He is the co-editor of *Summoning the Dead: Essays on Ron Rash* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018) and editor of *Ecocriticism and the Future of Southern Studies* (Louisiana State University Press, 2019). In 2015 Vernon received the premiere Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize for "Boone Summer: Adventures of a Bad Environmentalist." Regal House Publishing is releasing his YA novel, *Our Bodies Electric*, in 2024.

MARK POWELL is the author of nine novels. He has a BA from the Citadel, an MFA from the University of South Carolina, and an MAR from Yale Divinity School. Read more about him in an interview with Vernon forthcoming in *NCLR* 2024.

Mark Powell's ninth novel *The Late Rebellion* continues to mine the important cultural and regional veins he's been exploring for two decades. His works are always intense and his characters generally radicalized – for political causes in *Small Treasons* (2017), environmental concerns in *Lioness* (2022; reviewed in *NCLR Online Winter 2023*), and religious reasons in *Hurricane Season* (2023). Their obsessive behaviors begin not in New York, Seattle, or DC; rather, they're fostered in southern Appalachia, particularly South and North Carolina, where Powell is from and where he now calls home, respectively.

Born and raised in Walhalla, SC, Powell traveled the nation and world before landing in Boone, NC, where he has directed the Creative Writing Program at Appalachian State University for the past eight years. He has received prestigious fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Fulbright Foundation, and his novels have been lauded by critics and adored by readers and other writers, even winning the Chafin Award for his contributions to Appalachian literature.

The Late Rebellion extends Powell's penchant for characters on the verge of becoming fanatics and once again proves what a careful literary craftsman he is. The novel diverges, however, from his previous works; in addition to weighty explorations of local and global crises, moments of levity punctuate the narrative,

and many scenes are brimming with witty dialogue and hilarious encounters between characters. The novel tiptoes, in other words, on the knife's edge of tragedy and comedy, whereas his past works often left us to squirm in misfortune.

Set during the culturally divisive Trump presidency, *The Late Rebellion* follows the Greaves family over a single pivotal weekend when everyone returns to Germantown, SC. Their hometown is abuzz with the excitement of Oktoberfest and the local high school's homecoming, and the Greaveses are soon drawn into the melee. At first it seems like all is well. Richard, the founder and president of a bank, and his steadfast wife Clara happily welcome home their three adult children. Tom is a minor celebrity from a reality show called *American Ninja*; Jack is the athletic director at the high school; and Emily is the county solicitor and perhaps soon the district attorney.

However, things are not as they seem. Clara's anxiety is so high she has developed a drug habit. Tom's career is floundering, and instead of working on it, he's been galivanting around eastern Europe desperately trying to find himself. Jack is going through a mid-life crisis, and his daughter is involved with an abusive boyfriend. Emily's marriage is crumbling, and she cannot face her career after having worked a case in which a man set his wife on fire in their bed. And looming over every other

detail is the fact that Richard, the supposed family leader with all the answers, is being investigated by the FBI for shady business dealings. As a result, the family – or at least the family as it once was – is on the precipice of a great fall, and chaos begins to ensue in the characters' lives – fights, betrayals, affairs, scandals, even the questioning of religious faith.

The Late Rebellion showcases Powell's deep understanding of Southern cultures as well as his ability to distill the nuances of American life when everything around us seems precarious. His characters have an extreme love/hate relationship with the region and nation, especially as they consider the racial traumas of the past and their continuing ramifications in the present. For example, one character thinks to herself, "To be happy in a world of suffering, my lord, what kind of a monster can be legitimately happy knowing what everyone knew?" (224).

In an interview forthcoming in the 2024 print issue of the *North Carolina Literary Review*, I asked Powell if it's possible today to love any part of Southern culture without slipping into some kind of nostalgic or problematically apologist position. He responded, "Sometimes we don't have a choice. Sometimes the love is ingrained in us. So we try to love the South surgically, to love, say, the food but to disavow everything else. But there's a falseness to that too. This is why I appreciate



COURTESY OF CHARLES DODD WHITE

novels. They are one of the few places left where you can seriously consider these questions without the burden of having to arrive at answers."

This sums up the conflicted feelings many of us have about the South and, more broadly, America. The "better angels of our nature," as Abraham Lincoln said, are all too often elusive. They appear, in fact, to have been on hiatus for much of the past decade. Powell's novel powerfully interrogates how we got here and maybe also how we can improve.

On one level, *The Late Rebellion* is a dark novel about a terrifying moment in our social, political, and environmental history. Locally, we witness coerced underage sexting, domestic violence, and teenagers beating up grandmothers for

Oxy, while nationally and globally we see income inequality, the climate crisis, and the rise of the far right.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume Powell is a writer without humor or hope. *The Late Rebellion* is foremost a book about families – biologically and otherwise formed. In it, outsiders, strangers in a strange land, are thrust together. These various types of family can be dysfunctional; in fact, they are more often than not. But they can provide, as one character says, a form of support that is rare in this sometimes brutal and tragic world. As the Greaves family and several community members claw their way back to one another, we are reminded to rectify wrongs and, above all, to love those around us while we still have time. ■