

5th & Hope

Nathaniel Sewell

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Sewell's novel journeys through baby boomer anxieties to meaningfully examine a changing culture.

Nathaniel Sewell's *5th and Hope* is a deep exploration of what it feels like to be a white baby boomer coming to terms with a radically different world. Bringing together two journeys across America—one contemporary and one from the 1930s—*5th and Hope* looks at America's evolutions over the last century.

Bobby is a long way from his childhood home. A child of working-class Appalachia, he is now firmly established in the wealthy suburbs of Northern California, where he enjoys the luxuries of fine cars and good wines.

After a brief visit home for his mother's funeral, he's forced to confront the disparities between his former life and his present one, awakening deep emotional pains that he's kept buried for so long. In a desperate attempt to help her husband heal his split identities, Bobby's wife drags him on the adventure of a lifetime.

They follow the path of his grandfather, a missionary from the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, who drove across the continent in a Model A to preach and to establish his family in Kentucky. With his grandfather's diary as a map and the support of his wife and an eccentric millennial historian they pick up along the way, Bobby bridges his grandfather's working-class Christian life with the contemporary—and, for Bobby, foreign—realities of working-class America.

5th and Hope is a classic American midlife odyssey, with Bobby, a man who made his life in the new economy of the computer age but who grew up in a world dominated by factories and coal mines, representing the cultural anxieties of the generation that straddles two worlds.

This journey through baby boomer anxiety is at times heavy handed, as with a scene in which Bobby learns how to use Uber. His racialized view of the world is often uncomfortable to interact with. Still, the narrative's turns result in a character who is more than just a personification of the *Wall Street Journal's* op-ed pages.

In personality, Bobby is gruff and potentially unlikable. This is conveyed in the book's tone and structure. Bobby narrates; his worldview clearly dictates how the story is told. His moments of self-pity and emotional wallowing bog down the plot. In working to recapture the world he remembers, Bobby discovers that it's up to him to either embrace social changes or be resigned to a life in a nostalgic past.

5th and Hope is a product of the times, a novel that dwells in the concerns of a group that is struggling to understand their role within a changing nation.

CONSTANCE AUGUSTA A. ZABER (December 15, 2017)

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