

A Dream of Daring

Gen LaGreca

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In the antebellum South, inventor Tom Edmunton believes his new machine will change the lives of all in the region.

This engaging second novel, by Gen LaGreca (she was a finalist for *ForeWord's* Book of the Year awards for her first, *Noble Vision*), opens with Tom, who recently returned to Louisiana after living in the North for many years. He's attending the funeral of Polly Barnwell, a plantation owner and the sister-in-law of Senator Wiley Barnwell. Polly left the senator her plantation, Crossroads. Tom, who is courting Barnwell's daughter, Rachel, intends to unveil his new invention, an engine-powered tractor, to Wiley after the funeral, and hopes he will be among his first customers. Tom envisions the tractor ushering in a new age that will make farming easier, and with slaves no longer needed, allowing them to finally be free to regain control over their own lives.

However, when Tom shows the senator and Ted Cooper, another potential customer, the invention, they are not convinced of its usefulness to farmers. They also see no benefit in freeing the slaves, as they believe they provide them a better living than Yankee wage earners. A few hours after showing the men his invention, the tractor goes missing and Wiley is found dead. Cooper is the primary suspect.

Throughout the narrative, LaGreca masterfully creates metaphors to explore her key themes. "Crossroads" becomes suggestive of many things: The region is at a crossroads, on the verge of the Civil War; slavery is about to come to an end, and some are threatened by the change; and Tom is at a crossroads, too. He is a slave owner, having inherited his father's plantation eighteen months earlier, but he also wants the slaves to be able to make their own choices and find their own passions in life. As he gives them more control over their own lives than they have known in the past, they, too, find themselves at a crossroads.

Loss of control over one's destiny is a recurrent theme as well. Through the character of Solo, a mulatto slave, LaGreca explores how some overcome the limitations placed on them. Solo stands in contrast to Rachel, who limits herself by conforming to the expectations of her parents; they don't support her dream of being an actress because they don't view it as an appropriate profession for a senator's daughter. Tom acts as a bridge between the slave owners and the slaves, straddling both worlds as he develops strong relationships with each group and encouraging all to find their passion, as he did, in order to realize their dreams.

A Dream of Daring is suspenseful. The crime at the center of the narrative will keep the reader guessing until the final revelation. It is also thought-provoking. LaGreca's exploration of how people respond to, and sometimes reject, change and progress is relevant for all generations.

MARIA SIANO (January 18, 2013)

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