



A Particular Madness

Sheldon Russell

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Sheldon Russell's heartbreaking historical novel *A Particular Madness* is set in midcentury rural Oklahoma.

Jacob is the second child in a poor farming family. Much of his childhood is spent in isolation. He has little interest in, or opportunity to develop, friendships. As he grows, the voices in his head that entertained him in his youth get louder. He begins to believe that something is wrong with him.

Jacob graduates from high school determined to go to college. A lack of funds, his poor academic record, and a family full of problems stand between him and his dreams, though. His life becomes a series of lost hopes and personal tragedies.

Jacob's perspective is a sad one, as life on the farm is difficult and there is little joy in it. There are moments of levity, as with arguments between his uncles, and an anecdote in which his mother tries to give him an enema, but never any real happiness. In addition to having no friends outside of his family, Jacob feels he has none within it: his family members seem unsure of how to relate to him.

It is revealed that Jacob's circumstances are not a result of him being a loner, or a poor farmer's son: he has schizophrenia. Experiencing the world through his eyes is fascinating, and his singular way of perceiving and understanding the world garners empathy. Jacob describes how he loses control of the voices in his head, how they tell him how worthless he is, and how he learns to cope by writing down and organizing his thoughts. His passion for writing is ultimately the driving force in his story.

A Particular Madness is a tragic but compelling novel about psychological illness and poverty in post-Depression Oklahoma.

CATHERINE THURESON (November / December 2021)

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