

## Abilene

**Dare DeLano**

Mint Hill Books

(221pp)

978-1-59948-966-7

*In the heartfelt novel Abilene, three women unravel the mysteries overshadowing their families and their lives.*

In Dare DeLano's intimate novel *Abilene*, three women discover the truth about the men they trusted.

The book is set in a west Texas town. Its events take place thirteen years apart, in 2001 and 1988. In 1988, Cora is an undergraduate oscillating between psychotropic drug trips and dissecting Hegel's philosophies. She falls in love, but her lover disappears just before she learns that she is pregnant with Len.

In 2001, Len is thirteen. Though she grew up without her father, she had a happy childhood during which she formed stable friendships. Though she doesn't seem to be lacking for much, when she finds a clue regarding the identity of her father, she wants to know more. But Cora refuses to share more information with her. Elsewhere, Len's Aunt Jean shoots her husband following years of allowing his words to contradict her experience, turning his gun on him when she finds him with another woman.

Len and Jean share narrative duties with a distant narrator who covers the events pertaining to Cora. As the perspective shifts from internal to external views, dimensions are added to the events that take place in Abilene, whose idyllic, rural setting, including the particular setting of Cora's ranch, is vivified through raw sensory details, as with the smell of the stables and the crunch of dry grass beneath feet on an early-morning duck hunt.

Though the prose is straightforward with a natural rhythm, it reaches toward poetry in places, as when Cora and her lover watch "the sun sink down into purple" from a water tower. Such bursts of language, though, are obtrusive in otherwise cozy scenes. Further, the book's momentum is low-stakes, so that moments in which greater weight is suggested, as when Len intones that she's facing a "day of reckoning," strain credulity.

Still, Len's curiosity about who her father is does hold the story together; there's mystery around his absence. She and others work hard for each new piece of information about why he left Cora in 1988. This happens in tandem with Jean's slow uncovering of the truth about her marriage—a secondary plotline that often holds more attention than the central one, beginning with Jean's attempted murder of her husband before then moving backward from her jail cell. Indeed, amid its layers of rural philosophy, perspectives, differing time frames, and thoughts on what it means to love, this ambitious novel loses its center—even if every question it asks does receive a satisfying answer in the end.

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BEN LINDER (September 5, 2023)

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