

All the Broken People

Amy Rivers

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True evil and small town Southern charm mix in this multigenerational mystery.

Amy Rivers's taut mystery *All the Broken People* reveals the secrets beneath a small town's veneer of Southern hospitality.

Alice Bennett leaves the city—and her husband, Will—to care for her ailing mother-in-law, Mae. She becomes intrigued by Mae's town of Jasper, Georgia and the peek into the family's history that it provides. Before long, curiosity turns to fear. Vandalism and burglaries build up to a murder that bears striking similarities to a gruesome homicide from almost a century earlier.

Things turn even more sinister when Mae, recovering her memory along with her mobility, begins to question whether her accident was anything of the sort. As tongues wag and fingers point, suspicion turns to the Simms family—long time Jasperians who are embroiled in a bitter feud with the Bennetts, and whose Larry Lee Simms is a hothead and a drunkard, always in the crosshairs of police and fellow townsfolk. But nothing is what it seems in sleepy Jasper, which becomes a waking nightmare.

The cast is large and perspectives shift, but everyone is easy to keep track of. Distinct personalities, mannerisms, and voices help. Alice heads the dramatis personae, but is elusive. The bulk of her characterization comes from Larry Lee's perspective, and he focuses on her physical attractiveness.

Many characters function more as archetypes than individuals, serving a singular purpose or exemplifying one trait without much growth or depth. Larry Lee is enraged at the perceived slights of Bennetts, and his mother and disturbed sister add to the picture of the family's dysfunction and violence, but they are more a caricature of villainy than a credible threat. Characters are prone to fits of extreme emotion within the scope of single arguments.

The writing is spare, cutting to the quick of the book's swift plot points, but the staccato style is often at odds with the book's aura of Southern mystique. Elements of backstory are inserted as expository memories, sometimes going on for pages before the text drops back into its present narrative. Such shifts are disorienting and confuse the unraveling murder plot. The fading relevance of the 1940s murder, and hints of a romantic relationship between two characters stated to be cousins, are confounding.

The mystery is wrapped up in a succinct, plausible manner, leaving the characters at peace with the outcome. A late grab at sympathy for the devil, however, is forced and defies established characterizations.

With its consideration of the true roots of good and evil, *All the Broken People* is a tangled web of a mystery.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (May 14, 2019)

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