Clarion Review

Humor

An All-American Family
Joel Spring
CreateSpace
978-1-4820-9213-4
Four Stars (out of Five)

Author's flair for irony mixes with vivid realism in a strange journey through a cruel past.

Perpetual hippies John and Joanie Brader set off on a road trip to discover John's cultural roots in the bizarre and thought-provoking *An All-American Family*. The novel's time line moves back and forth between the present and various points in the nineteenth century, but through author Joel Spring's skillful management, readers are unlikely to lose their way.

When they reach their Oklahoma destination, laid-back John and Joanie are faced with unanticipated challenges, including unfriendly locals and a sordid motel surrounded by a pack of aggressive stray dogs. The couple chooses to forge ahead, and they eventually learn some of the intriguing history of John's family (his connection to the Choctaw Nation and a prominent town founder, for example). Mysteries and strange coincidences begin to come together, leading them to an unexpected outcome.

Readers will find John and Joanie an interesting if unconventional pair, and they function well as the thread that draws the audience along on a unique journey. John's liberal views are challenged by many of the things he discovers about his ancestors, most significantly their involvement in slavery.

The author chooses a frank approach to describe the realities of slavery and racial discrimination in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Readers are faced with a particularly grisly crime against a slave on the first page of the novel, which sets the tone for how the subject will be approached throughout. While they do set a stark contrast between John's gentleness and the cruelty of many of his ancestors, the scenes are often graphic and disturbing.

Characterization is thorough across the board, and dialogue is consistently natural. Scenes are described vividly and effectively, and Spring confronts a variety of social issues,

including racism, homosexuality, drugs, and cultural hypocrisy. The theme of perceived freedom is effectively explored throughout the novel.

While Spring's satirical humor often works, it occasionally seems incongruous alongside such vivid and violent descriptions of crimes against humanity. The cruelties of slavery are so clearly depicted that many of the scenes will remain with the reader long after the book's end. While this ability to bring pieces of a narrative to life is the mark of a skilled writer, the juxtaposition of intended satire with realistic depictions of torture and murder may be difficult for many readers to process.

Spring, a professor, member of the Choctaw Nation, and author of several nonfiction titles, is clearly a talented and historically knowledgeable writer with a definite flair for irony and a natural ability to set a scene with vivid realism. Those able to distance themselves from the more disturbing moments will find the book most satisfying, and virtually every reader of *An All-American Family* will be left with quite a lot to think about.

Jeannine Chartier Hanscom