

★ **Andermatt County: Two Parables****Pam Jones**

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Welcome to Andermatt County, Texas, a place that exists at a phantasmagoric crossroads between Southern gentility and vice, whose small-town horrors hit a little too close to home. Pam Jones's pair of gothic parables, "Happy Birthday, Dear Bitsy" and "Ye Shall Be as Gods," twist together to form a disturbingly appealing welcome into our most everyday nightmares.

Emmett is a lonely teenager when he disappears to Andermatt County with Rex Henry, a charismatic older man to whom he is instantly drawn. His new home is getting just about used to disappearing youngsters, though. First, there's Renata, who vanishes while carrying treats to a classmate; no hint of her remains, save the bluish tooth absorbed into Emmett's budding collection.

Then Delta—who is touched, who sometimes speaks in tongues—is lost at the drive-in; only one bloody toe marks her loss. LaRue, a potential postulate, is found. Her gory end brings a new beginning for Emmett and Rex Henry, who just may be grotesquely ensconced in religious infamy after all.

Add to this mix a pneumatic girl named Magical, who brings love to Emmett; disturbed young Marilu, who sets LaRue on the path to sainthood but resents the confines of her supposed goodness; and six-year-old Esther, who lives across town and worlds away from Rex Henry's darkness, whose mother wishes she'd stop fawning over dead and broken things and enjoy tea parties and dolls like a little girl should.

These disparate but connected characters' lives intersect in glorious and upsetting ways, raising questions around innocence, brokenness, reverence, and human cruelty. They offer important commentary on forging meaningful, healthy human connections, challenging each other's failings, and accepting other people's quirks—so long as they stop short of the truly gruesome.

Jones has a gift for drawing beauty out from brutality, even when it's of a lopsided and unexpected sort. Her descriptions trade between being winsome and petrifying, and the situations imagined in the course of these two tales will haunt their audiences. They are presented without order in a tightly packaged book that you must flip to read fully—go darkly idyllic first, or save hope for last; either way will create a lasting impression.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January/February 2018)

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