



Blessed

Sherry Robinson

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Blessed is an appealing, thought-provoking novel that interrogates religious obligation and altruism.

In Sherry Robinson's contemporary Christian novel, *Blessed*, a charismatic, enigmatic new preacher creates rifts among his parishioners and in his own home.

Twelve years ago, the conservative New Hope Baptist Church wasn't quite prepared for its new minister, Grayson Armstrong. Now, the town gathers to mourn his death, though not all who knew him grieve. The story of Grayson's controversial tenure unfolds through the perspectives of his wife, children, and the citizens of Mercy.

As Grayson's funeral ends, his story is told in a round-robin of voices. Chapters are brief, sometimes no more than a page long, and each character speaks with a firm, distinctive voice, with enough backstory given to make them engaging and credible.

This story has depth; characters' recollections and experiences result in a complex, multidimensional view of Grayson. It becomes apparent that, while some benefited from his compassion and understanding, others resented the changes he forced on them. These included abolishing the choir, removing stained-glass windows, and renaming the church Ignite Community Church—decisions driven more by ego than by fellowship.

The story's pulse quickens in time with Grayson's increase in proposed changes and how they stirred dissent. It shows deepening divisions, rumors flying, and church members feeling the chill of alienation. Grayson's wife struggles to accept her husband lavishing time on his parishioners at the expense of time spent with his children, and his oldest son adds his account of his father's rejection. What begins as a story of normal change and adjustment shifts to something darker.

Grayson's successful defeat of an effort to oust him does little to lower the story's tension, built through skillful opposing examples: a non-churchgoing waitress found him to be a sympathetic listener, while a meek, elderly widow felt shut out of the church she'd once found comfort in. A portrait of the town emerges as an alcoholic veteran describes the once-thriving but now abandoned plant he and other homeless men take refuge in; others describe church traditions going back generations.

The fact that Grayson's premature death is not explained looms large in the story, driving it to an unexpected but realistic conclusion. Throughout, the book withholds judgement of Grayson and those around him, leaving that space for readers to fill. Themes of obligation and the limits of idealistic altruism are tied together.

Noteworthy for the questions that it raises, *Blessed* is an appealing, thought-provoking work of contemporary Christian fiction.

SUSAN WAGGONER (August 2, 2019)

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