**Clarion Review**

General

**Circle of Shadows**
Keith M. Heim
iUniverse
978-1-4697-4473-5
Four Stars (out of Five)

Keith Heim's eminently entertaining debut novel, *Circle of Shadows* is an evocative story about a fifteen-year-old runaway struggling to build a new life in mid-1940s Morehead, a small town in Alabama. Strand by strand, the young farm boy from Nebraska constructs an intricate web of shadowy deceit to hide his identity and shield himself from his memories of an abusive father, a loving mother, older brother, and the "incident with Marvin [that] came forcefully to mind."

As he morphs from Joseph Whitfield into Steve Bowman, he charms seventy-eight-year-old Awillah Pike and surreptitiously confiscates a hidden shed in her backyard for his new home. He forges her signature in order to enroll at Morefield High School, where he becomes its highest achiever. He picks up odd jobs for money for bare necessities, often going hungry. He keeps friends at arm's length with the exception of a stray cat, "Man Friday," his girlfriend Laura Lee Andrews, and a former suitor of Laura's named Rollie Chance. He also befriends Taliaferro Davis, an African-American teenager whom he covertly meets in back alleys. But there is nothing covert about the public whipping Steve gives the school's two bullies. And the solar plexus punch the author delivers as the book's surprise ending is one that readers will long remember.

Heim is a first-class storyteller and his narrative is polished, well-structured, and clean of typographical and grammatical glitches, as one would expect of a former professor and diplomat. His prose is pleasantly reminiscent of the best authors of the Old South. The cover photograph of tall fir trees in light and dark shadows ideally depicts the thematic thread to the story.

The deficit in Heim's novel, however, is that it sometimes brushes up against an issue such as racial prejudice but doesn't develop it to the extent it deserves, despite the two bullies and their warning to Steve that, "Down here in Dixie, we don't associate with Niggers." In

addition, the characters, even though they are credible, cry out for fuller development. This becomes especially true as we watch the interaction between Steve and Tal, who is introduced into the narrative and then disappears for a lengthy period of time. Even with these shortcomings, however, readers will find *Circle of Shadows* to be captivating in both its style and its substance, especially with its surprise twist that comes at exactly the right moment for maximum dramatic impact. Heim's novel is highly recommended for adults and young adults alike.

*M. Wayne Cunningham*