

Collecting Candace

Susan M. Brooks

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William Faulkner never wrote a darker, more disturbing tale than this one. Like Faulkner, Brooks knows that the sweltering Southern climate and simmering obsessions make for an explosive brew. The Candace of the title is a thrice-married sexpot of “twenty-six and a half” who lugs around a Bible and has a battered statue of the Virgin Mary glued to the dashboard of her Maverick. But in Brooks’s skillful hands, Candace is much more than a caricature of white-trash sirenhood. The character’s Catholic upbringing is central to her identity, and, marriages notwithstanding, she is no easy pushover.

The story begins when she drops in for a drink at the Hi-n-Dri 24-Hour Liquor and Mart in Gainesville, Florida—at 4:00 a.m. Here she meets the unnamed male narrator who will soon take her on a murderous journey in a psychopathic attempt to restore her to a kind of virginal wholeness. After listening to her babble on about this and that, he concludes that Candace has depleted herself in the conversations and confessions she had with her previous husbands. How better to reclaim her innocence, he thinks, than by killing these men and thus rendering their knowledge of Candace moot? “Those endearing bad habits, idiosyncrasies, things that only a lover could appreciate, had been trodden over and abandoned by men who just happened to be in the right place at the right time. With each telling of a childhood memory or a private joke, her essence was spread more thinly. ... He was willing to knock on every door in the state of Florida, if that was the only way to get it back.” What’s chilling is what happens after the two of them get past the doors.

Both Candace and the narrator have been psychically wounded as children, a point reinforced by the storied artifacts that they carry with them. While the narrator lusts for Candace from the moment they meet, he treats her with reverence and keeps a worshipful distance from her as they proceed on their homicidal mission. For her part, Candace wanders through the carnage with the moral detachment of a tot picking daisies. The two are so focused on the purification ritual that neither shows the slightest concern about the trail of clues they leave behind them. There is neither art nor passion in these killings—just the dumb, inevitable flowing of water to its lowest point. This is the most terrifying element of all.

Brooks founded the teen magazine *REALGIRLS: The Magazine for Girls with Better Things to Do than Their Hair* and wrote the book *Any Girl Can Rule the World*. For her first novel, *She’s The Girl*, Brooks was commended as one of the “best new voices” in independent publishing for 2004. With this grimly fascinating new entry, her voice becomes even more commanding.

EDWARD MORRIS (August 18, 2009)

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