

Clarion Review ★★★★★

GENERAL FICTION

Delta Song

Margaret Vail

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"To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi."

-William Faulkner

Margaret Vail's novel, *Delta Song*, is written in the tradition of twentieth century southern authors like, Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Harper Lee, Carson McCullers, and twentieth and twenty-first century author, Pat Conroy. *Delta Song* begins when Vail's protagonist Maggie (Magdalene) returns to her childhood home near Vicksburg (on the Mississippi Delta where she grew up in a "sharecropper" family) for the funeral of her friend and one of her mentors, Fred Andersen. His death appears not to be accidental. Daring to help a "Negro" wanted by the law during the tumultuous time of the 1950s is his only crime. The author writes, "But rumor, floating talk...said someone had helped Fred into the water, that Fred, always a little crazy, had interfered as usual with other people's business...Fred crossed the line, Fred paid the penalty."

Written like a three-part symphony, the author seems to use the rhythm of the Mississippi River as the bass line for her prose. A brilliant attempt, but some sections of the prose do not blend well. Suffering from a lack of editing, certain phraseology comes off as awkward and harsh. But in her defense, no matter how smooth a river may seem on the surface, underneath its misleading calm is a choppy and frothing violence as its water flows through rocks, turns, and nooks and crannies. Vail writes, "The river flowing forever on, majestic in its power, unadorned except with its own creation, hearts calling out to it, seeking to lose themselves in it, this great Brahma that cleaved the continent...and to feel the spirit of God breathe across the waters, calling forth the greatness and destiny of the created world." The first part of the novel gives a quick introduction to the Mississippian world Maggie has left behind and the reasons for her return.

The second part of the novel is Maggie's childhood memories of her friends and family and what it was like growing up in a sharecropper family around the time of the Great Depression. The author pertinently shows readers the day-to-day poverty, harshness, and grittiness of survival tempered through the innocence of a child's point of view. More importantly, from Maggie's observations the reader learns the awful plight of being an African American during this era. The ready acceptance of hatred and mistreatment of African Americans and women at this time is chilling and disturbing. Vail does not let the reader forget how immersed Americans were in ignorance, bigotry, and their apathy to equality.

In the third section, Maggie, now a teenager who is a reader and thinker, begins to question the societal norm of her countrymen. With the aid of her mentors, Fred Andersen and Father William and others like-minded individuals, she does her best to thrive as an intellectual and loving humane person in a world of oppression and prejudice.

The author grew up in the Mississippi Delta. Receiving her doctoral degree from Tulane University, she taught humanities at Xavier University in New Orleans. Readers are enriched by her abilities to fasten her life experiences and intellect into a lyrical, poignant novel.

LEE GOODEN (June 27, 2011)

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