

Dirt Road

James Kelman

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Southern music and keen observations move the teenage protagonist toward adulthood in this thoughtful book.

James Kelman's *Dirt Road* is the story of a talented but self-conscious teenager who is just beginning to grapple with adult realities.

Sixteen-year-old Murdo and his father, Tom, are emotionally stunned by the recent deaths of Murdo's mother and sister. They leave their native Scotland to visit relatives in the southern United States. Along the way, a chance encounter with a family of zydeco musicians sparks a connection between Murdo's budding but undeveloped musical talent and a richly-spiced stew of southern American folk music—a connection that may help him to bridge the gap between cultures, as well as the one between youth and adulthood.

Seen through Kelman's rambling, discursive stream-of-consciousness narrative, Murdo is a keen observer who, like many teenagers, does not always fully process what he sees. Nor does he fully understand the tangled skein of assumptions and prejudices that wind through every culture, every family, and every adult relationship.

Murdo is strongly attracted to a girl he meets during an impromptu music rehearsal, though neither he nor the reader explicitly notices her race until more than a hundred pages later, in the midst of an awkward conversation with his father. This is both amusing and typical of the protagonist.

Kelman's masterly sense of authorial irony lets the perceptive reader see what Murdo doesn't quite fully understand, including his father's emotional distance, which is born of pain and loss; his well-intentioned relatives' unconscious hypocrisies and hidden frustrations; and the inevitable confusion and heartbreak of first crushes.

But although Murdo has a tendency to be blithely oblivious to many of the emotional difficulties of everyday life, he immediately and acutely notices every detail of the stagecraft strategies that seasoned musical performers use to attract and hold their audience. A clue, perhaps, to his destiny.

Any tale by Kelman would attract attention, but *Dirt Road* deserves to win its own audience, one that will enjoy its thoughtful teenage protagonist's exploration of a new world that is moved by the rhythms of the South's lively musical heritage.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (May/June 2017)

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