

Even As We Breathe

Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle

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In the hot Southern summer of *Even As We Breathe*, the groundbreaking first novel from Cherokee writer Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle, a young man's loyalties and foundational stories are tested.

WWII cleared the Carolina mountains of its young men, but Cowney Sequoyah was born with a twisted foot; he is left behind. Still, Cowney, the son of a WWI hero, is eager to serve in whatever capacity he can. He accepts a groundskeeping job at Asheville's storied Grove Park Inn, which has been conscripted to host foreign diplomats in a polite form of detention. Also working at the inn is Essie, a brilliant young woman from home whom he's desperate to know better.

As Essie and Cowney form a fragile friendship over dominoes and books in an unused room of the inn, Cowney also contends with the uneasy parts of growing up: questions about who he'll become; concerns over the health of the warm grandmother who raised him and the prickly uncle who holds him at a distance; caustic attitudes toward Native Americans, of whom loyalty is demanded and to whom equality is denied; and the pains of unrequited love. The inn's "guests" are a scant presence in Cowney's coming of age, which, when it's amplified by a disappeared diplomat's child and unfair suspicions, becomes a complicated affair.

The distinct features of Cowney's Qualla Boundary home, where a freed circus capuchin explores the tree lines, a mystical waterfall cave waits in the mist, and fires and outsiders are a constant annoyance, glitter among the book's mysteries and surprises. Family losses and revelations cap off Cowney's summer of self-improvement, during which his heart is broken and his determination is soldered.

Avoided family truths become a source of freedom in the fascinating historical novel *Even As We Breathe*.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2020)

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