



Forsaken

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In this superior work of historical fiction, a black laundress is accused of murder in a town dominated by Jim Crow.

This riveting first novel, inspired by real events, tells a harrowing tale of an honorable man in a dishonorable world.

It's 1912, and Charles Gilbert Mears, a newspaper reporter in Hampton, Virginia, has a hot story. A black laundress is accused of murdering her white employer, and Mears is in the right place at the right time to get the scoop. But as his investigation continues, he finds that the story, and his own feelings about it, are not as clear-cut as they first seemed. The accused, Virginia Christian, is a juvenile of limited intelligence, and the circumstances of the quarrel between her and her employer are unclear. As Mears slowly comes to realize, none of this matters beside the paramount fact of her race.

A former Confederate officer is the governor, and entrenched racism rules society, so there is little chance of mercy. The mere suspicion of black-on-white crime arouses muttering lynch mobs, and even white men are not immune from threats or violence if they cross the lines set out by Jim Crow.

Mears is an intriguing character, a polite but persistent young man with a strong sense of morality and a lively mind that leads him to form his own conclusions about right and wrong. He's a teetotaler in a culture steeped in whiskey, and he is still grieving the loss of a close friend due to social bigotry. He is about to find that his conscience will once again set him apart from the world he lives in.

The tension in *Forsaken* comes not from the question of whether or not Christian will be judged guilty, but from Mears's dawning realization of the profound, murderous injustice of his world, and his reaction to that realization. A secondary story line, in which Mears discovers that a white teenager is being abused by a wealthy and influential relative, has less of an emotional impact than the gut-wrenching story of Virginia Christian, but it effectively illustrates the infuriating degree to which race and status confer impunity on some while presumptively condemning others.

Forsaken is superior historical fiction detailing a cruel national past and a young man who follows his conscience.

BRADLEY A. SCOTT (Spring 2016)

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