



Full Beaver Moon

Peter Skinner

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(307pp)

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A hero with a troubled past journeys into the deep South in search of understanding in the rich historical novel Full Beaver Moon.

In Peter Skinner's spellbinding literary novel *Full Beaver Moon*, a biracial teenager plans his future in the wake of his mother's death.

In the book's languid portrait of the 1950s South, details are meted out in mysterious increments. Willie is the son of beautiful Sadie, who kept a list of the powerful men who frequented her Virginia bordello. And there are hints of trauma in Willie's past, including a fire that he was accused of starting. Armed with his mother's volatile information and inherited money, Willie makes plans. He wants to attend university, and he sees possibilities in the restoration of Sadie's home. He's also stricken by the reality that one of his close friends, Stick, saved his life and vanished.

Willie is developed with depth. There are flickering mentions of his upbringing. In the present, he's a sharp-minded young man from whom much is anticipated, though his strength has so far gone untested. He's surrounded by fascinating characters, including his mentor, a deceased bell ringer; a fortune teller who makes cryptic proclamations; and an interior decorator, Cary, who helps Willie revive the bordello. As Willie works to find women to work in his mother's home and has brushes with the sheriff, glamour and danger intertwine. In town, Willie's daring enterprise is a tolerated blight—and refuge to some.

The bordello is drawn with just enough color related to its furnishings and fashions to evoke its ostentation without resorting to caricatures. And sensitivity is displayed toward its inhabitants, whose backgrounds are glanced upon to humanize them. There are also realistic flourishes, including about the women's different races and how their patrons exoticize them.

The book's momentum builds when Willie sets out to find Stick. He faces prosecution from the police and accepts the kindness of strangers. As he travels deeper into the South, he shares impressions of its ills: he meets a woman whose son was lynched; he sees the remnants of a hurricane. His responses to these incidents are both gradual and intricate, and his reflections push him toward adulthood. Still, it's a growth pattern that begins to repeat: passersby are met and deliver insights in turn. And Willie's return to the bordello is somewhat anticlimactic. As his focus on his goals reignites, though, the novel meanders toward a conclusion that befits his convictions.

In the historical novel *Full Beaver Moon*, a determined teenager remakes his present while reckoning with his tumultuous past.

KAREN RIGBY (May 9, 2024)

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