

Gritty Southern Christmas Anthology

Gritty South, Editor

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The true meaning of Christmas can be hard to find in troubled times, but the stories in Gritty Southern Christmas Anthology are earnest in searching for it.

'Tis the season to be truthful: the diverse stories collected in *Gritty Southern Christmas Anthology* are candid about the complications that mark many Southern Christmas celebrations.

An Ashley Jones poem precedes the collection, encouraging families who are too often sidelined in popular Christmas images to celebrate the holidays in ways that are authentic to them. It announces that “Jesus was a brother. / A bruh, not a bro,” and insists on Santas and nativities that resemble that same reality. It’s a sharp, appealing entry that sets the tone for the pieces that follow, which approach the holidays conscious of tradition, but also with some proud, self-sufficient Southern style—and a desire to upend what’s expected of a Christmas tale.

Tribulations surround the book’s cast. They deal with divorces, dead-end jobs, losses, imprisonments, and disappointments. Many struggle to make ends meet, let alone buy the perfect present. In the humorous, Civil War-set story “Moonlight,” soldiers from opposite sides arrange a trade to satisfy their cravings, though none trust each other—with cause. The story reads like a wry reversal of “The Gift of the Magi.” And in a standout tale in the Southern Gothic tradition, Covid-19 represents a second chance for a man who’s given early release from prison, just in time to see his family for the holidays. However, his homecoming is less idyllic than expected.

Essays and personal memories commingle with the book’s fiction entries. While Pete Black’s “Still Nacht” begins in narrative form, it morphs into a retelling of the 1914 Christmas Eve ceasefire in the trenches of Europe, when “the magic of Christmas ... touched the hearts of soldiers.” And “Annie’s Gift,” which reveals itself as autobiographical at its end, concerns the hardships that surround a little girl who’s just falling in love with Christmas—but whose family situation is marked by dysfunction, tarnishing her sense of wonder. She receives a doll as a gift that comforts her through years of abuse and neglect.

While the book’s characters are rarely cozy or idealized, they are an identifiable bunch. They slide into the holiday season on their foibles and mistakes, and many are in no mood to apologize for their faults. At the same time: they collectively yearn for the magic that Christmas used to hold for them, and that seemed to fade beneath the realities of adulthood. Their pains are sympathetic, familiar, and humanizing.

While there is some awkward phrasing, and while occasional mid-entry shifts in tone and pacing lead to stilted progressions, most of the entries are appealing and accessible in their presentations. Still, there are a few errors throughout—a homophone issue; unnecessary capitalization; misspellings; a missing article—that trip up the reading. Further, a few entries over-pronounce their intentions, impeding audience immersion.

Less concerned with evocative details than they are with realism, these stories move fast through their blunt situations, knowing that some truths can’t be covered up, or distracted from, with tinsel and lights. Holiday magic is

less their realm than is unvarnished matter-of-factness. Religious declarations appear at measured intervals—some a bit too forceful, but most serving as a fitting reminder of the book's roots.

The short stories collected in *Gritty Southern Christmas Anthology* would not deign to suggest that the magic of Christmas washes all one's troubles away—but they still manage to wish their audience a merry holiday.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November 6, 2021)

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