

House of Rougeaux

Jenny Jaeckel

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On a Martinique sugar plantation near the end of the eighteenth century, sister and brother Abeje and Adunbi are the first generation born into slavery. They are orphaned at an early age. Abeje grows into a healing woman with an instinct for natural remedies and a gift of second sight, while Adunbi is valued for his building skills. Though Abeje never has children of her own, hers is the spirit that echoes through Adunbi's descendants as the book moves across six generations.

The story unfolds in seven sections, each focusing on a different member of what becomes a very large clan. To the book's credit, this is not your typical generational tale. The sections are not presented in chronological order, but skip from Abeje to the 1950s and civil rights eras, then back again to the last decades of slavery, then forward to post-Civil War years. Also unconventional is the fact that the story does not pass from parent to child, but broadens to hopscotch among characters who are distant cousins.

Both of these high-wire risks work to the book's advantage, creating a wide tapestry rather than a narrow portrait and giving a sense of the vast scope that the word "family" entails.

Fine brushstrokes bring the writing to life, capturing the scent of woodsmoke and sun-dried grass, or a box of rose candies that symbolizes choice. Occasionally, this penchant for literary flair overtakes clarity, rendering events vague or confusing, as when the opening pages make an eighty-year leap without explanation or demarcation. At its best, though, the book achieves a resonance that lingers long after its plot points are forgotten.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of the book is that in spite of the inescapable presence of slavery and prejudice, it isn't really about either of these. Jenny Jaeckel's *House of Rougeaux* is about people—varied and fully realized individuals who make a flawed world their own.

SUSAN WAGGONER (March/April 2018)

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