

Joe Peas

Sam Newsome

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Joe Peas is a compelling slice of quaint rural Southern life.

Joe Peas by Sam Newsome is the tale of a seemingly innocuous Italian house painter who, through a series of hijinks, positively impacts a small town in North Carolina.

Introduced at the local Waffle House as a vibrant storyteller, Joe Peas quickly weaves himself into protagonist Dr. James King's life, becoming a fixture at his family practice. The two exchange stories and family histories, with Joe eventually declaring the two best friends. Though he's charming and chatty, much of Joe's past remains a mystery—one that Newsome expertly unravels throughout the course of the novel.

Other King's Mill residents are also introduced through Dr. King's practice: kindly widow Ida Bickley, her troubled daughter Lora, haggard farmer John Hunter, centenarian Willie Jones, and a host of others who, by the end of the book, entwine their lives and become something of a ragtag family.

The main source of plot advancement, however, is provided by the titular character. Part storyteller, part caretaker, Joe Peas closely interacts with every other character, improving their lives in some way, from helping an elderly woman apprehend her attacker to aiding a dying man in completing his final wish. Easily the most impacted is Dr. King, who eventually owes much of his financial success to the mysterious Joe.

Newsome's text is well written and reads easily. Characterization is dynamic; most characters are believable, compelling, and advance the plot in some way. Initially, it's difficult to see how so many story lines will work themselves together coherently, but they do so eloquently, making for an interesting look at relationships among residents of a small Southern town. Dialects also play a major role in the book and are conveyed well, from the slow, authentic drawl of rural townsfolk to Joe's quick, broken English/Italian combo.

A chronicle of Dr. King's legal battle with his neighbor over rules of neighborhood decorum is at times tedious, though, containing more legal information than is needed. The book's ending is hurried, abruptly drawing together loose ends in a way that is dissatisfying. Chapter breaks are too frequent and distract from the overall story.

Newsome's *Joe Peas* is a compelling slice of quaint, rural life that offers a charming look at a small town and the ways in which a kindly outsider impacts it. *Joe Peas* is an impressive second novel for author Sam Newsome.

AMANDA ADAMS (October 31, 2016)

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