ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

MYSTERY

Justice Served
LoniKaye Harkless
AuthorHouse
978-1-4772-8283-0
Four Stars (out of Five)

True-to-life dialogue and vivid characters team up to paint an evocative picture of small-town Southern living.

Returning to her Southern home to help care for her dying mother, former radio personality Joyce Hughes finds herself involved in uncovering the true story behind a decades-old murder—a heinous crime that resulted in the death penalty electrocution of a distant relative. Debut fiction author LoniKaye Harkless draws her characters vividly and paints an evocative picture of small-town Southern living in the absorbing mystery *Justice Served*.

Hoping to get closure for her mother, Hughes embarks on a fact-finding mission to clear the name of Robert James through interviews, police records, and newspaper accounts of the time. And it was a different and difficult time—the woman killed was the wife of the local grocer and white; the accused a young black man who was like a son to the family.

The characters come alive off the page. Joyce's older sister, Vonetta, is constantly tired from spending her days cooking and cleaning. Sis, their mother, is terminally ill but looks forward to Joyce's updates on Robert James. And Joyce, who returned home from California, has interests ranging from fishing to spinning jazz records to admiring a handsome man here and there.

The book captures the heartbeat of the South, from the welcoming glass of lemonade proffered in each household to the descriptions of everyday life. For example, a constant house guest in Vonetta's home is the lonely and ever-helpful Junior Banks: "No one ever called him Junior or Banks. It was always Junior Banks."

The title refers to the facts Joyce ultimately discovers about the intertwining lives of the people involved in the murder case from fifty years earlier—an event that still ripples into her own time.

Now living in Los Angeles, Harkless was born and raised in South Carolina, and writes

that the book is based on true events. The dialogue is realistic, occasionally tinged with a regional dialect. The content can be graphic, but not gratuitously so considering the subject matter and the racial tension of the time depicted. Verb tenses are mixed throughout the story; better editing would be beneficial, but it is easy to understand what's happening.

Secondary to the main plot is the wonderfully told story of an adult child caring for an elderly parent. This theme appears intermittently throughout the narrative as Joyce encounters others dealing with the same situation. The companionship between Joyce and Sis is warm and caring, though the parent-child roles have switched. As Joyce tells a friend, "Her life is not ending, it's only just beginning."

Justice Served explores an engaging mystery that some readers may solve before the book's conclusion, but it's a satisfying tale nonetheless.

Robin Farrell Edmunds