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Literary

Kind One
Laird Hunt
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When her mother's second cousin, the cultured Linus Lancaster, asks for fourteen-year-old Ginny's hand in marriage early in *Kind One*, Ginny eagerly accepts. Bored with her farm, her parents, and her limited prospects in the antebellum south, she is thrilled by the chance for change. It proves to be the worst decision of her life. "Once I lived in a place where demons dwelled," Ginny claims early in her narrative. Before Hunt's tale is finished, she will earn this proclamation and become a demon herself.

Once away from her parents on Lancaster's Kentucky pig-farm (cruelly named "Paradise"), Lancaster reveals himself to be a brutal tyrant with a wicked temper. Soon his multifaceted abuse—physical, sexual, and psychological—extends beyond Ginny to the slaves he owns as well, keeping the small household in a state of constant terror. Under his violent thumb, Ginny finds herself complicit in Lancaster's violence. She turns on Cleome and Zinnia, the two slave girls who had been her only friends, and is unwilling to stand up to Lancaster as he mercilessly beats Alcofibras, the young slave whose fairlytales offered the only brief reprieves in her bleak life.

Hunt's novel covers a hundred-year period, from 1830 until 1930, told in shifting perspectives interwoven with diary entries and Alcofibras's fantastic legends. Comparisons to Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy are made easily and aptly as Hunt brings the latter's brutality into the former's antebellum South. The ingenious inversion on which the novel centers, whereby the prisoners of Paradise become the keepers, is Hunt's own, and he mines this reversal for all its symbolic potential.

"They say once you've had the shackle on you it never comes off," Zinnia writes decades after she escapes Paradise. Although much changes in the world over the course of the novel, the survivors of Lancaster's cruelty always feel the shackle. Forty years later, Ginny is still overwhelmed by the shadow her imprisonment casts over her; racked by guilt, she finds it

impossible to live a normal life. As Hunt reveals the full legacy of Lancaster's cruelty, the reader easily extrapolates the narrative to the millions directly affected by slavery and the shadow it still casts over the country. Like the legends Alcofibras tells, *Kind One*, too, takes on the stature of myth, becoming a study in the perpetuation of violence, the lasting impact of abuse, the damage subjugation can inflict on the individual and society, and the potential for redemption through forgiveness. The Kind One follows Hunt's *The Impossibly* and *The Exquisite* .

Michael Beeman