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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ MYSTERY

King of Nod: an epic ghost story

Scott Fad
Monogram Books (June 2007)
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> *'…sometimes askin 'bout a thing can spoil it. That's mostly what magic is, you see? It's in what ain't said. It's in the secret.'*

King of Nod is absolutely masterful literary fiction, doubling as an indigo-tinted Southern Gothic set in the simmering ruin of Sweetpatch Island, South Carolina. Supernatural happenings have a large role, but they serve a greater purpose: an unblinking study of flawed human nature. Fragments of the central mystery's solution are parceled out in a way that feeds both anticipation and satisfaction. The prose is lyrical, intelligent, with textured characters and palpable tension. Social commentary abounds. Martin Luther King visits; schools are turbulently integrated. A boy pulls hoods off Klansmen he recognizes at a church-burning. Shots are fired. People are looking in bedroom windows and going dangerously astray at night. Babies of questionable fatherhood are the fulcrums of destruction for some families, but the sole salvation of others. A series of pranks and dares builds to a crescendo of horrific consequences. Nothing has been right since an unjust lynching before the first World War; the past won't stay in the past. "All cyclonic phenomena, by definition, repeat. Concepts of beginning and ending are meaningless."

An aged rootmagic witch named Laylee Colebriar is the dedicated protector of young Boo Taylor, the headstrong protagonist: "She was made of cinnamon and molasses, burnt wood, rusted bedsprings, pine soap, cypress hides. Her dress was the rag she used to mop the floors." She knows more than she's saying about a vengeful Beast which roams the island's overgrown corners. The time period changes back and forth as Boo assimilates troubling news at two stages of life—thirteen and thirty-nine. He proactively moves to save himself by saving others; he is consumed with issues of identity.

The author is uncompromising in his commitment to a story of gutsy hints and mature nuance, closed loops of setup and payoff. It lacks bloat despite the stratospheric page-count. Of course it could have been briefer, but some enriching element would have been shortchanged.

Scott Fad has been hiding for years in the world of respectable work, near Wilmington, Delaware. If this first novel sells like it deserves to, maybe he will be able to transition away from the nine to five. William Faulkner is never going to write another word, but this late-blooming author has thirty or so years ahead of him to create further wonders. Any large publishing house which passed on this missed the opportunity of the year. *King of Nod* is not predictable genre fare, it's terrific literature of the first order. Readers will short themselves on sleep and weasel out of commitments to stick with this story.
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