

King of Nod

Scott Fad

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Anger and revenge long outlive their causes, revenants visit their venom on the descendants of people so long dead their origins may be impossible to discover. When Boo Taylor returns to Sweetpatch Island, South Carolina, for the first time in twenty years, the ghosts of his past and others' pursue him still. For the sake of his childhood sweetheart and her unborn child, he must untangle the riddle of his ancestry and the reasons those ghosts live on.

An extraordinary book, *King of Nod* is part spook story, part Southern Gothic, and part noir, cloaked in the language of lush imagery and fed on social consciousness. Its characters come alive in their quests to survive childhood, abuse, neglect, discrimination, and oppression, and to deal with the consequences of their choices.

Boo's hauntings are many: the girl he left behind; his parentage; the elusive but powerful magic of the good (Laylee Colebriar, a "guffer" doctor and his parents' former housekeeper) and the evil (the witch Mamie Stuvant, who murdered his young friend Hoss years ago). Sweetpatch has changed, at least on the surface. Now veneered over with tourist traps and fairways, it projects an aura of prosperity. Yet ancient prejudices live on, and the poverty and despair once the daily bread of the island's poor and black inhabitants have not gone away; they've merely seeped underground, waiting to resurface when the time is right.

Boo loved redheaded Gussie Dutton in their youth, and he still does. Sweetpatch, however, harbors secrets that nurture those twin evils, anger and revenge, and Boo has been a lightning rod for their attention from the very beginning. As Laylee Colebriar knows all too well, "...that was what they...wanted: him, a man, so they could take from him, have yet another generation to haunt, bleed, break, keep the misery breathing and themselves fat with it...It was all about punishment for long-ago sins."

Skin-stealers, witches, a mysterious Beast that devours boys and men alike, the fingers Boo lost as a teenager fighting with the Beast, surfacing in a jar twenty years later, bones found after a fire that are not who they seem—all these blend to weave a spooky narrative that jumps back and forth in time, and from person to person, to relate a tale of privilege and deprivation, loss and rec-lamation, spanning generations.

MARLENE SATTER (October 13, 2008)

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