Clarion Review

Historical

Lifted from the Waters
Culpepper Webb
Pecan Row Press
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Four Stars (out of Five)

American southern literature seems to come in two forms: Gothic-tinged tales from the likes of Faulkner or O'Connor, or ribald, good-ol'-boy frolics from writers like Rick Bragg or Roy Blount, Jr. Culpepper Webb's novel, *Lifted from the Waters*, is neither. It's a family saga narrated by Gunter Wall, a stalwart member of "The Greatest Generation." The book begins with the great Mississippi River flood of 1927, with young Gunter and his family driven from their sharecropper's cabin when a levee breaks. Gunter is lifted from the water by his resolute father, Tom, who saves him along with his mother Mary and brother Everett. "I can't see. I can't see! The water's muddy. Cold!" Gunter says. "Rushing water has pinned me to it as I struggle, my head coming up for air as I choke out the water, the grit remaining."

The Wall family takes temporary refuge with Mary's kinfolk, but they're received begrudgingly. Gunter's father soon signs on with the cotton oil mill in the town of Oak Leaf, Mississippi, and with hard work, native wit, and ironclad honesty, he carries his family through the Great Depression and toward a semblance of prosperity.

And then comes World War II. Gunter leaves college for the Marines. Everett is diverted from his ambition of becoming a railroad engineer and joins the Army. Gunter survives Iwo Jima. Everett is killed in Europe.

Readers follow Gunter home, through college, and then on to his banking career which he begins at the behest of the local institution's president, James Street. Street's son also died in the war, and the older man cherishes Gunter and grooms him as his professional heir. Gunter marries, fathers a son, and lives his life by the motto he was taught: "Always do the right thing."

Webb hews close to true life throughout *Lifted From the Waters*, as witnessed by his handling of the deaths of Everett and the younger Street. There are other tragedies that bring sorrow to Gunter, and Webb renders such scenes affectingly. The characters are entirely

believable, and Gunter in particular is quite likeable.

The prose is clean and straightforward, marred only slightly by the voice given to Gunter's father, which is somewhat unrealistic for a man with a fifth grade education. Readers who appreciate history might also be disappointed that little attention is given to the African American people of Mississippi. There's an encounter early, when the senior Wall pays a boat owner to rescue a flood-stranded black family, and another later when Gunter champions a commercial loan for a deserving black merchant. But school desegregation is rendered in a few words, framed by a change in Gunter's son's football team.

Integration in Oak Leaf had been gradual: no riots, no marches, pick which school you want to attend, choice is free, most folks get along, then a court order. One school, not two. Immediately, in Tom's senior year. Springtime, he's the quarterback. Fall, he's on the bench.

Lifted from the Waters is told in the present tense, often with short, sharp sentences, giving it a diary's immediacy. The novel is chronological, rendered in vignettes, often with months or years between scenes. Nevertheless, readers will have no trouble following the narrative, from its depiction of a frightened boy atop a roof awaiting rescue to the fragile old man who listens to the song of a rabbit-hunting beagle and feels his heart give way, knowing that he "will be lifted from the waters."

Gary Presley