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General

Long Gone Daddies: A Novel
David Wesley Williams
John F. Blair Publisher
978-0-89587-593-8
(March 1, 2013)

Long Gone Daddies is a bluesy, smoke-tinged story of a man, his guitar, and the family lore that haunts and threatens to dismantle his future. Luther Gaunt has grown up on tales of his father and grandfather, roving musicians who left their wives and children in search of something more. That something came in the curves of a guitar—a 1930s Cassandra Special Rider—an instrument that communed songs to the men and made them dig to get to the music that mattered.

The story follows Luther as he and his band drive to Memphis in search of a good song and maybe a little bit of fame. Delia, a blonde femme fatale, tags along and inserts herself into the band, intent on snagging a hit from Luther's songwriting skills and pushing herself to the top of Nashville's country music scene. Although the band wants to see where this whirlwind blonde takes them, Luther battles his inner demons—the voices that tell him that he will end up just like the men who came before him—bereft of courage and at the edge of where he longs to be, a place where songs tell stories and mean something more.

This is a book about music, and Williams delivers it in a voice that is smooth and melodic. There is warmth in his prose, where the rhythm of snappy dialogue and fluid, well paced exposition lulls the reader into the settings—1950s roadside diners, Memphis on the brink of Elvis, the open road—all tinged with nostalgia but saturated in vibrant color. Williams has a gift for describing the sound and spirit of a particular song. For example, on describing one by Little Junior's Blue Flames, a character drawls, "Nah, man. It starts with these guitar licks got steam coming off. Then it chugs and goes. It sounds a little country, but I don't mean all slow and whiny like Hank Williams. Hank's dead and buried and this is something new coming." In one fell swoop, Williams captures a distinct sense of character while delivering an auditory description that signals that the characters are on the cusp of significant change.

The intertwining story lines masterfully develop both plot and character as Luther reflects on the lives of his father and grandfather, the story moving back and forth in time. At

times, Williams tends to linger in poetic excess ("I wanted to hear her version of the truth, the ring and toll of it"), which results in the unpleasant effect of heaping meaning onto a moment instead of allowing the moment to speak for itself. However, there is a refreshing mix of lyrical prose and snappy dialogue that creates an experience that is at once intimate and sensational. There are lurid love affairs and smoky bars, but there is also the chase of an endless, memory-choked dream that makes Luther wonder whether he can transcend the history his family has left behind.

Long Gone Daddies is at once dreamy and wild, a churning, soul-searching trip into the root of music making. Readers will find in this novel an immersive and imaginative experience.

Shoilee Khan