

Loving the Dead and Gone

Judith Turner-Yamamoto

Regal House Publishing (Sep 6, 2022)

Softcover \$17.95 (256pp)

978-1-64603-258-7

In *Loving the Dead and Gone*, Judith Turner-Yamamoto's multivoiced novel, the death of a young man provokes women in a rural North Carolina town to revisit their unmet longings.

Clayton is puzzled by his wife Berta Mae's contentions with her unyielding, elderly mother, Aurilla. Darlene is the stunned, seventeen-year-old widow of Donald Ray, whose body Clayton found. In this intertwined story, Aurilla, who married into a family of tobacco farmers in the 1920s, reveals the reasons behind her toughened exterior, while bereaved Darlene, in the 1960s, is caught in her sensual memories, sparking a yearning to find fulfillment again.

Turner-Yamamoto's thorough characterizations result in compelling heroines: Aurilla's marriage is a disappointment, and Darlene's is an all-too-brief joy. Aurilla is headstrong, but shows glimmers of compassion; Darlene, as much as she appears to be adrift, is calculating in her actions. Each woman struggles with how their families perceive them; both are linked through their illicit detours away from their own loneliness. The novel is gradual in arriving at their separate instances of adultery.

The story focuses, in part, on how the women's imagined connections with men—whose outward differences seem, at first, like a balm—end up subverting their good senses. The result is an enticing exploration of the secretive harms visited on others, alongside the exposure of long-standing cracks within family relationships. Mother-daughter trials, and women's shifts from innocence to knowledge, sharpen these incisive sketches of love marked by loss.

Amid harsh truths that people fail to account for soon enough—including that it's seldom wise to push back pain before it's worked itself through—there are still reasons for fresh resolve. Relief arrives through realistic, piercing awakenings.

Loving the Dead and Gone is a moving, insightful novel about growing through tragedy.

KAREN RIGBY (September / October 2022)

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