

Magnolia City

Duncan W. Alderson

Kensington Fiction (Mar 25, 2014)

Softcover \$15.00 (448pp)

978-0-7582-9275-9

Rebellious Hettie brings spirited character to this historical novel of wildcatting and bootlegging.

With *Magnolia City*, Alderson debuts with an intensely descriptive novel set in 1928, the pre-Depression oil-boom years, as Houston, Texas, debutante Esther “Hettie” Allen pushes social boundaries set by her prosperous and prominent parents.

Like all families, the Allens have troubles. Hettie is not her mother’s favorite. Her father is distant too. The family’s pride is Charlotte, who has her father’s coloring, right down to the gray eyes. As the novel opens, Charlotte reigns as the 1928 Carnival Queen of No-Tsu-Oh, the Houston elite’s party of the year. It’s only right—Allen ancestors were Houston’s founders. However, Kirb Allen, the girls’ father, made an imperfect marriage, so even though he is president of a major bank, the family is no longer upper, upper crust.

That story is woven into Alderson’s complex linear narrative. Hettie is the protagonist, growing in maturity but remaining thoroughly self-absorbed. The novel is told from her point of view, other characters playing off her—the two most distinctive being her aunt, Cora, and her sister, Charlotte. Hettie is more liberal and generous than her parents, but she’s defiant as well. She proves this when she elopes with Garret McBride, who has come to Houston from Montana to make his fortune in oil. While not making this a romance novel, the passion between Hettie and Garret gives it a bit of that aura. Hettie lusts after Garret—she “loved men like her husband ... the edge in their eyes, their legs thick as tree trunks, the hands roped with veins.”

The setting is highly descriptive, although the repeated use of certain references—from flapper-era “kiddo” applied to both sexes to the lighting up of Lucky Strike cigarettes—become noticeable rather than seamless. Alderson does superb work, however, in setting the scene in the Big Thicket oil patch and the bootlegger’s brush country. Along with the wildcatting, the bootlegging chapters (Hettie and Garret begin rumrunning Mexican mescal and tequila to earn wildcatting money) are the most colorful parts of the narrative.

Magnolia City seeks the gravitas of *Gone with the Wind* or *The Thornbirds*, but Hettie’s adventures don’t quite reach that level. However, with its detailed and thoroughly researched narrative lending veracity to this tale of Texas and big oil, Alderson has penned solid mainstream fiction.

GARY PRESLEY (Summer 2014)

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