

Maranatha Road

Heather Bell Adams

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Sympathy is created for these disparate and complex characters in a way that is worth savoring.

Set in the late 1990s, Heather Bell Adams's *Marantha Road* takes a seemingly standard setup of Southern poverty literature and burnishes it into a memorable, quietly compelling page-turner.

In a breathtakingly short span of time, seventeen-year-old Tinley Greene finds herself orphaned, set upon by a sexual opportunist, rescued, loved, abandoned, homeless, and pregnant. If this sounds like standard Appalachian melodrama, think again, because in an equally brief span of pages, the story transcends expectations.

Rather than a done-her-wrong tale, the book is a round robin of first-person narratives told from shifting points of view—those of Tinley; her rescuer, Mark Caswell; and Mark's aging parents, Sadie and Clive.

Suspense is built through these narrators. Tinley's traumatic experiences cause her to live in a half-real, half-fantasy world. Mark's bipolar tendencies go unacknowledged. Sadie is blinded by a mother's love and her genteel decorum, and Clive exists within his own well of love and silence.

Though all cause suffering to the others, one of the book's greatest strengths is that there are no villains here, just ordinary humans with the flaws we all carry. Each character emerges as distinct and minutely detailed, and the book's ability to elicit realistic sympathy for their disparate voices is an achievement worth savoring.

The plot gets rolling in the first sentence and keeps unfolding to the last page, yet stays firmly within the realistic setting of a small Southern town. Every time the book seems to settle into a predictable story line, a new plot twist explodes like a tiny bomb.

A confrontation after a church service looms as large as a countdown clock in a techno-thriller, and the characters' conflicting wants set them on a collision course that keeps the pages turning.

The writing deserves special praise for its dialogue, which sounds utterly natural, and its strong metaphors, which never reach beyond the characters' experiences, as when Sadie compares cattle lowing in the distance to "a sound like heavy furniture being moved."

Accomplished, knowing, and memorable, *Marantha Road*, by Heather Bell Adams, is a book to be enjoyed on many levels, not the least of which is that it is a darned good read.

SUSAN WAGGONER (Debut Fiction 2017)

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