



Night Bird Calling

Cathy Gohlke

Tyndale House Publishers (Jan 5, 2021)

Softcover \$15.99 (432pp)

978-1-4964-2972-8

Cathy Gohlke examines spousal abuse and restored faith in *Night Bird Calling*, an engrossing novel about a woman's flight to rural Appalachia.

In 1941, just after her mother's death, Lilliana overhears her husband Gerald conspiring against her. With only her purse and a promise to return to Aunt Hyacinth to guide her, she joins the matriarch in her No Creek family home. Despite her fear that Gerald will track her down, Lilliana finds friendship and a welcoming Baptist church there, but not before roiling a few moonshine-addicted bullies.

Celia, an eleven-year-old amateur sleuth, urges Aunt Hyacinth and Lilliana to open their home as a library and informal haven for literacy. The Ku Klux Klan retaliate because a white teenager tutored a young black man there, threatening Lilliana and her friends. This chilling, violent sequence culminates in explosive truths about blame, with a fitting twist on conventional justice.

Amid colorful townsfolk and Yankee drifters, Celia is a lodestar. A clever busybody who wears her heart on her sleeve, her convictions inspire adults, while her knack for over promising and counting on people's goodwill adds humor. However, Granny Chree, a Black herbalist and wise woman who pushes Lilliana about her wavering faith, falls into troubling tropes. She's a stark outlier in an otherwise sensitive exploration of racial injustice.

Brutal family revelations are threaded with passages from Oswald Chambers's devotionals, which steer Lilliana toward finding renewed strength. Her gradual willingness to stand up for other victims, even though she once failed to do so for herself, is encouraging. Light romance with a dashing Reverend, who keeps a respectful distance, promises Lilliana a hopeful future.

Night Bird Calling is a sumptuous, textured ode to small-town relationships. For all of their intricate secrets and sins, No Creek and its battlegrounds yield to become a beautiful refuge.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2020)

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