ForeWord Reviews

Only Son
Lafie Crum
Livingston Press
978-1-60489-013-6
(Oct 20, 2008)

"We're never fully in the now, never free of the past and future. The only people who really live in the right-now are kids," realizes middle-aged Cora, as she watches her young grandson Billy catch lightning bugs one summer night. "I could tell by the way he moved he was thinking only of that instant, living in the now." Cora is one of four characters who take turns narrating this thoughtful, heart-breaking debut novel about the unraveling of a young family.

The story opens with her son Bill getting laid off from his carpenter job in their economically hard-pressed Kentucky town. When he and his high school sweetheart, now wife Martha, bump into her cousin, "one of those guys who goes off to work (up North) and stays away and now only comes back to visit," their lives change forever.

Once content living in the valleys of their forefathers, the couple pack up their meager belongings and with Billy in tow, move to a large Ohio city where nothing binds them. They flounder tragically both there and on their subsequent return home.

The book's title refers to the status of main protagonist, Bill, and also his namesake, Billy. As Bill's Aunt Dora points out, "The family name lays on him."

This is Crum's first work of fiction. A dean at a Kentucky college who's also written academic books, Crum grew up in the region he so poignantly describes here.

The four narrators—Bill, Martha, Billy, and Cora—each have a unique voice. Bill is straightforward, usually keeping his emotions hidden. Martha's whole world, at first, revolves around her son and husband. She waxes poetic about Bill's kiss in the dark: "But the kiss would be so much more, like we shared breath." Billy speaks with the comprehension and words of a five-year-old. Cora's ruminations are the best of all—she's a philosopher for the ages, whether reminiscing on her front porch at dusk with her photo albums or silently chastising mourners at a funeral.

This is a quiet, sad book with a lot to say, especially when Cora speaks: "[Young people] seem to always look ahead. Now that I'm older it seems I'm always looking back, living in the past. Life is funny like that."