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Clarion Review ★★★★☆ SPIRITUAL

Porch Music

Kathy Maresca
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Strong bonds carry a family through their contrasting dramas in the historical novel Porch Music.

In Kathy Maresca's debut novel *Porch Music*, members of a tortured Florida family support each other through dramatic shifts.

Bessie is the daughter of a half-Seminole wise woman, Ma. She loves dancing but faces racist taunts at public dances. In a nearby town, Rose is kicked out when her mother discovers that she's pregnant. With music and prayer, Sister Daisy of the Thankful Country Church buttresses Rose against her feelings of guilt and shame.

Rose moves in with Ma's family, where her presence triggers memories of the family's traumas: Bessie's difficulties with her children; the fact that her sister Maggie's son, Buster, was unwanted. Buster and Janie, Bessie's daughter, enter puberty confused by their elders' conflicts. Daisy's church further provokes Rose's found family, reminding them of the abuses they've endured because of hypocritical spiritual leaders. As Rose's pregnancy progresses, the family's pains come to the fore, demanding confrontation and healing.

Narrated by Janie, Buster, Daisy, and Ma—the youngest and the oldest members of the cast, all of whom are at the periphery of the family's centered struggles—this balanced story unearths secrets throughout its tense pages. Buster distances himself from his bitter mother, escaping into books and going fishing with his dog. Worried Janie takes care of her twin brothers, the house, and her ailing mother instead of herself. Both develop a distinctive voice as they deal with the torments handed down to them: Buster by assuming a Southern twang, Janie through practicalities. Janie takes solace in Rose's musical companionship and home repairs, too. Ma's homeopathic remedies and sage advice and Daisy's sacrificial religious choices further guide the family.

Ma and Rose expand the book's reference points beyond its everyday travails. Their contributions are represented best in poetic, whimsical passages that cover people's dreams and interpreted visions. Metaphorical and atmospheric, the novel is moved forward by such moments—as well as by heated conversations, thoughts about nature, and music (the sound of Percy's guitar; Bessie's beautiful singing voice; the family playing music with one another). Still, its emotions are handled in a more evocative manner.

As the women in the family approach an eventual showdown, the book becomes bittersweet, with its rich, competing emotions coming to a convincing head. Strong bonds carry the family through their contrasting dramas in the historical novel *Porch Music*.

MARI CARLSON (January 29, 2023)

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