

Red Clay Suzie: A Novel Inspired by True Events

Jeffrey Dale Lofton

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In the evocative historical novel Red Clay Suzie, a teenager's growing awareness of his sexual orientation clashes with his conservative surroundings and makes him a timeless and empathetic hero.

Jeffrey Dale Lofton's quiet historical novel *Red Clay Suzie* centers on a gay youth in the midcentury rural South.

From a young age, Philbet senses that he is different from other children in his Georgia town—not only because of his unusual name, a blend of his father's and mother's names. Other white boys bully him for his sensitive nature and lack of interest in the opposite sex. His gym teacher faults him for “screaming like a girl.” His uncles torment him with cruel nicknames, and his aunt draws unwanted attention to his physical disability. Only his immediate family members and a Black friend rally around him—in the latter case, despite racial taboos and the differences in the boys' emerging sexual identities. Later, in Philbet's teenage years, an older boy champions his interest in cars and becomes the object of his burgeoning desire.

Despite the stark poverty of Philbet's setting, his sense of it is sparkling. He notes details about it in a distinctive, sensory manner, so that even red clay assumes a life of its own: it has the “texture of silken butter” until a downpour turns it to “creamy soup.” Philbet wonders if the region's soil could explain why he is a “weirdo”; he compares himself to an “under-formed bean” whose nutrients get swallowed up by nearby shoots. Indeed, his growing awareness of the conservative society that engulfs him makes him a timeless and empathetic hero.

Standout secondary performances abound. Philbet receives patient mentoring from Knox, the boy next door; he's a tender, appealing character who becomes Philbet's love interest. Other stalwart supporters include Philbet's mother and grandfather, who guess at his queerness without ever mentioning it; each finds a way to show him quiet love. In one poignant scene, Philbet's mother drives him to an antique store owned by a gay man and his partner. When the men exchange an intimate touch on the sly, Philbet thrills at what he witnesses and feels “like the snack machine dropped two bags of chips instead of one.”

Although the language sings, the plot is slow-moving. After an engaging first chapter featuring Knox and Philbet, the narrative jumps back in time ten years, relating, step by step, Philbet's story from the time he is four until he heads off to college. One incident of violence stirs the action early on and proves pivotal, but it occurs offstage. Many other scenes read like nostalgic vignettes. It's not until Knox re-enters the narrative when Philbet is a teenager that the story regains its momentum and takes off.

Red Clay Suzie is a funny and wise coming-of-age novel set in the rural South.

PAULA MARTINAC (July 7, 2023)

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