

Secrets on Saulter Road: Discovering Hope and Forgiveness in the Wake of My Toxic Upbringing

Joan Kendall

Rush Avenue Press (Apr 23, 2019)

Hardcover \$24.95 (169pp)

978-1-73389-865-2

Joan Kendall's memoir speaks to a time and place too often recalled in false rosy tones, exposing the traumas of her Southern family during a time of racial unrest.

Growing up in Alabama was more than garden parties and the Gulf's "million-dollar breeze," says Joan Kendall in her memoir *Secrets on Saulter Road*, a fearless account of the trauma beneath the surface of her Southern girlhood.

For Kendall, the country outside of Birmingham, Alabama, is a place of binaries. Segregation, poverty, and ignorance are rampant, but not acknowledged by "nice" people. Kendall learned to navigate a world full of unspoken rules and invisible boundaries, and those rules become symbols and anecdotes within her book, whose picture of the civil rights era South is full-bodied.

Kendall recalls how a black friend was not allowed on a glass-bottomed boat at a beach in Florida, and how her family protested though the boat owner wouldn't budge. The incident becomes a metaphor: white people are on one side of the social "glass," while black people are confined to the other. This trope of separation comes up again and again, depicting how claustrophobic and traumatizing it is to be imprisoned within a bigoted society.

However, the book's primary focus is on Kendall's family history of addiction. Alcohol poisoned her childhood, and as her mother's addiction worsened, Kendall was torn between whether to stay and support her family or abandon them and start her own life. Kendall describes becoming a volcano of rage. Her memories are hair raising, made even more shocking by the dark humor and wordplay that punctuate her book. She describes someone "waddling," with a "short, squatty body and plump, stumpy legs."

Descriptions of clothing, furniture, cars, and activities elicit the culture of the 1950s South. By the time the family's tragedy is revealed, it's clear that the secret devastated every family member in different ways. Conversations and anecdotes are preserved with care to humanize those within Kendall's story, even people who aren't outwardly sympathetic. A loving tone suggests that the narrator did much work to heal herself.

With its unusual perspective, born of Kendall's childhood in the segregated South, the book is a clear account of the damaging effects of inequity between races, sexes, and other groups. It conveys bewilderment over prejudiced systems at odds with values learned at home, and in this way is fresh and timely.

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CLAIRE FOSTER (December 9, 2019)

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