



Sleepovers

Ashleigh Bryant Phillips

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Ashleigh Bryant Phillips's gritty short story collection *Sleepovers* is bold in exploring rural life in the US South. Its entries reflect upon family, childhood, relationships, and loss against backdrops of poverty, abuse, and tragedy.

While the stories in *Sleepovers* stand on their own, together they reveal a town where everyone knows one another, and where secrets do not remain hidden for long. In "Shania," two girls are friends until a violent episode comes between them. Their paths cross again years later when one returns from college to find the other pregnant and working as a cashier. Touching on the effects of family, poverty, and abuse, the story sets a provocative foundation upon which the remainder of the pieces, and their numerous hard-luck characters, are built.

Written from the perspectives of children, the elderly, the well-intentioned, and the wicked, the entries include "Return to the Coondog Castle," which is told from the points of view of a mistreated wife, a young mistress, the mistress's mother, a widow, one of two churchgoing sisters, and a Bluetick coonhound. Each distinctive narrator adds nuance to the tale.

Strong descriptions capture a once vibrant community that's given way to a grocery store, a trailer park, a Baptist church, and a Duck Thru gas station. The plight of the town's farmers is evidenced by abandoned soybean fields that were drowned by rains after lengthy droughts. Residents confront harrowing historical legacies; one leaves the town to attend college, another is an EMT and an attentive mother, and some show kindness to others at times of need. They grapple with the powerful ties of family, the limits placed on individuals, and the challenges of breaking free from the past.

Sleepovers is an unflinching collection through which the complexities, curiosities, and complications of rural Southern life come through.

KARLA STRAND (May / June 2020)

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