

South of Everything

Audrey Taylor Gonzalez

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Memphis minister Audrey Taylor Gonzalez's first novel, *South of Everything*, is a quintessentially Southern *Bildungsroman* that focuses on a young girl in postwar Tennessee as she navigates the spaces between black and white, the religious and the sacred, and youth and womanhood. Vibrant, sensual language and persistent spiritual surrealism make this project both seductive and wondrous.

Missy Sara lives on a sprawling farm that transitions from raising bulls to hosting show horses in the years before her confirmation in the Episcopalian church. Though she is encouraged to be a proper young lady, fingers unstained by the local barbecue and associating only with the "right" kind of people, no social chiding is able to stilt her sense of the magical. Instead, she finds her way via the stories of Old Thomas, a worker whose presence exudes divinity, and beneath the branches of the not always visible lolololo tree, its properties almost hallucinogenic, in the back of her family's property.

The dark events of the time period roil around Missy's family, taking a heavy toll on those she loves most: Old Thomas is nearly murdered by a racist mob; her childhood friend, B-Bubb, is party to a terrible accident that claims his sanity. Missy, though forced to adapt to the challenges of these events, always manages to find solace in the wonder that overlays her home: in birds that carry messages heavenword, or in the tangible kiss left by her grandfather as his spirit rose. Tales of animals that speak, epic journeys into wild lands, and the colorful remnants of the miracles she witnesses are as integral to Missy's maturation as are hard Memphis realities.

So, too, is an emerald-eyed young man, Mr. Washington, whose Plains wisdom and gentle ways send a spirit of rebellion through her veins, awakening the first hints of individual need in her. As Missy makes her way into young adulthood, as lackadaisically as God's finger sketched out the geography of her hometown, Washington's presence proves to be the divining rod that leads her to her own true center.

Gonzalez's novel defies the notion that magic is something that ought to dissipate with time or maturity, or that fades when one is properly steeped in religion. As the novel progresses, there is no doubt that the smatterings of color and vibrant dashes of the holy that Missy experiences all around her are more than a mere trick of her imagination. The novel makes heirlooms of the "miracle marks" left by Missy's most transcendent experiences, and the prose flows unpredictably from one bit of magical realism to the next.

South of Everything is a coming-of-age story of uncommon beauty, shot through with Southern poetry and Memphis musicality, that is as eye-opening as it is sympathetic.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (June 25, 2016)

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