Clarion Review

Historical

Southern Families
Michael V. C. Alexander
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Four Stars (out of Five)

"You're only thirty and still in the prime of life," Lucy Summerlin's mother tells her in the spring of 1901. "You have beautiful cheek bones and a lovely smile that lights up every social gathering you attend. Dozens of men would feel blessed if they had a treasure like you."

It is a year into the new millennium and Lucy is opening another chapter in her life. Her older brother, Chip, has hired her to be a bookkeeper and sales assistant in his newly acquired business, the only drugstore in the town of Perquimmons City in far eastern North Carolina. After thirteen years on staff as a school teacher and servant with the very rich but ill-tempered Merritt family, Lucy is more than ready to trade her life there for a more independent one closer to her family.

So begins an account of a decade of change in the lives of Lucy, a spirited, feisty, and diminutive but progressively opinionated woman; her sister, Julia, the "pretty one" married to the town doctor; and the dutiful, married Chip, who may or may not have a wandering eye.

Changes are afoot in Perquimmons City as well. It is noted that in 1906 not a single horseless carriage could be found there; a year later, fourteen automobiles share the road with horse and buggy. Rich details like this make the fictional town and its inhabitants seem very real.

The novel serves as a portrait of a quaint time in America's past when life actually revolved around family relationships that were carefully tended. Although life was simpler, it could also be harsh. For example, "The miserably poor black section on the eastern side of the creek seldom entered the white majority's consciousness except during the week or two before Christmas." At that time, the narrator explains, donations of food, used clothing, and bedding in good condition were delivered to them—"a charitable act the black minority welcomed and resented at the same time."

Thus, all is not perfect for these Southern families. Political turmoil, hurricanes, tragedy,

and the changing social fabric all leave their mark on the residents of Perquimmons City.

This is the author's first book of fiction. A native of the state he describes so richly, Alexander taught at the collegiate level until retiring ten years ago. He has previously written several historical works.

Readers who like history will enjoy this glimpse into America's past as it unfolds in mostly diary-like fashion. Sometimes, however, the extensive dialogue between characters delivers an inordinate amount of information (often repeating what the reader already knows) that could be better utilized as exposition.

This story doesn't only belong to Lucy, although she remains at its core. As one of the town "big shots" tells how the unmarried Lucy went to the local bank to open an account, he says, "Imagine that—a tiny little woman like Lucy insisting on being completely responsible for her own finances and obligations. What will the world come to next?"

Robin Farrell Edmunds