

Sweet Dream Baby

Sterling Watson

Sourcebooks Landmark (November 2002)

\$22.00 (352pp)

978-1-4022-0017-5

"I listen for the songs about secrets and promises," writes the author in the person of twelve-year-old Travis.

This book is full of secrets and promises and the strong flavor of the post-World War II South. Struggling to understand a world where the neighbor boy can shoot an arrow at him with impunity, and his Japanese mother is institutionalized for depression, Travis quickly turns to the kindness of his seventeen-year-old Aunt Delia when he is sent to live with her and his grandparents in humid, rural Florida for the summer.

His car-driving, rule-breaking Aunt Delia introduces him to rock'n'roll, even nicknaming him "Killer" after Jerry Lee Lewis. She takes him cruising, introduces him to her friends, shows him the local lover's leap, and treats him to sodas at the drug store. At first grateful for the female attention so lacking at home, then enamored by the mystery and beauty of his black-haired aunt, his crush turns serious when she takes him skinny-dipping. Suddenly, her welfare is as important as his own, and he acts to protect them both, with tragic results.

The author, a professor of literature and creative writing, and director of the Writing Workshop, M.A., University of Florida, is also a screenwriter. His first three novels are Weep No More My Brother, The Calling, and Blind Tongues. The music that he weaves into this book—from the title, to the front-page songs of Bob Dylan and the Monotones, to the tunes played when Delia and Travis go cruising—provides a bittersweet thematic thread and strongly evokes the 1950s setting. The songs convince young, newly adolescent Travis of the simplicity and rightness of love, while failing to inform him of its complexities and shadows. As a result, this is not the usual coming-of-age story but rather a coming-of-age gone horribly wrong, of unsheltered innocence destroyed by adult expectations and desires.

"I look at her," explains Travis. "My eyes say there's nothing I wouldn't do for her. The thing in my chest is big now, an unbearable weight I know I'll always carry ... the songs are all playing in my head, and they all say you do anything for the one you love."

The horror of the story is that there are some things one should never do, especially if one is only twelve years old. *Sweet Dream Baby* proves the point and provides a great read, but definitely no sweet dreams.

PAULA SCARDAMALIA (March / April 2003)

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