Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Sweetgum Slough: A 1930s Florida Memoir
Claire Karssiens
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Five Stars (out of Five)

In the 1930s, Claire Karssiens spent six years of her early girlhood in a tiny Florida backwater called Sweetgum Slough. This rural, isolated hamlet gives its name to her memoir, an exuberant and vividly depicted series of vignettes about life in a poor area during the Great Depression.

Karssiens, a former teacher in international schools of Latin America and Europe who has retired with her husband to her native state of Florida, has no previous experience with memoir. Nevertheless, her first effort combines dramatic flair and natural storytelling skills that combine to evoke the shining idealism of a young girl's memories, wherein even gossip in the pit toilet outside the school takes on a romantic tinge.

To give the reader a sense of her formative years in Sweetgum Slough, Karssiens employs short chapters, bookending them with some impressionistic verses. She writes a few pages about her one-room schoolhouse experiences, with lively sketches of her classmates, like Delano Whatley, whose feet were always bare and who wore nothing but overalls in the summer, or wily Belle, whose notes always contained licentious rumors. She devotes a paean to the hardroad that stretched through Sweetgum, then turns to a description of a typical church service, an unforgettable anecdote about finding an unborn pig fetus on her friend's farm, and other bits and pieces. Picking out the most memorable details of people and places, Karssiens brings the small community of her girlhood to life so that readers see it as rough and hardscrabble, but also, through the child Claire's eyes, wonderful and beautiful.

Sweetgum Slough is nearly perfect for what it is—a slim volume of brief impressions that succeeds beautifully as a short, poetic memoir, largely on the strength of Karssiens' prose. With sensitivity to the colors, smells, tastes, and sounds of rural Floridian life, Karssiens writes in sentences that sing with poignancy and keenly observed description. Here she is describing

the hardroad:

> *I did not know that the hardroad would become a state of mind. That it would sometimes be a small, odd feeling in my body—like some familiar and not unfriendly thing left there by mistake after surgery. I didn't know that I would feel it as a stray blood vessel in my heart that suddenly throbbed when there was moonlight on the pine needles, when I heard a mindless chicken sing, or when I smelled the soft scent of a summer rain.*

Sweetgum Slough will be enjoyed by Floridians, those nostalgic for the Deep South, people interested in life in the Great Depression, connoisseurs of memoirs, and anyone who appreciates beautiful writing.