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General

The Cyclops Window: A View into Southern Life
Sally Bolding
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William Faulkner might be pleased to see his work carried on faithfully in this novel, or he might cringe that the author nailed such a dead-on depiction of small-town Mississippi life. Bolding, a Mississippi native herself, creates a true-to-life landscape of small-town Southern life in the late 1940s. In the South, the landscape defines its people, makes them prosper, makes them greedy and, in some cases, makes them prisoners. In and around the fictitious Mississippi River town of Port City, generations of families rise and fall and struggle, as they intermarry, scheme, and crawl forward in a setting that offers few opportunities.

Elia Hannah Marshall is a woman willing to buck 1940s tradition and take control of her life, in an era when women are expected to take a backseat to their husbands. She is one of the town's more prosperous residents, having inherited her wealth-land-from her father. She wants to learn how to manage and invest wisely after seeing her blustery husband fritter away their resources. To gain her independence and keep her property out of his hands, she hires lawyer Abner Owens to teach her about land management. Owens, who grew up with Elia, tries to seduce her to enhance his social standing in the town. "I remember having a crush on you in high school when you were a girl," Owens tells her. "In those days, you wouldn't have looked my way. You were too good for me."

The novel addresses the touchy issue of race-impossible to avoid in a Southern novel. Port City, like all Southern towns of that era, is sharply divided by race-socially, economically, and geographically. The town is no longer the antebellum South, reminiscent of "Gone with the Wind," but residents' roles and self-perceptions are very clearly determined by ethnic group.

One beautiful, mentally unstable black woman, Arorah Hannah, powders her face white, unable to accept who she is until she allows the help and support of another black man whose intelligence is overlooked by everyone because of his deformities. Port City may not change much, but its characters evolve. And a single, circular-shaped attic window, resembling a

Cyclops' eye, symbolically watches these people. Some grow with self-discovery, like Elia and Arorah, but others shrivel, overwhelmed by forces they can't control as their lives collapse around them.

The inevitable familiarity among characters who are forced to interact continually on a limited stage is a constant that gradually moves the novel forward. That casual pace, familiar to Southerners who know how to weather steamy August afternoons, may create a daunting task for impatient readers accustomed to more lively paced novels. But the reader who sticks with the journey is rewarded as these characters fall into place.

Karl Kunkel