

The Dark of the Island

Philip Gerard

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Greed, regret, deceit, and betrayals drive the mystery, but Gerard's literary, often emotionally charged, writing make this a worthwhile read.

In *The Dark of the Island*, Philip Gerard follows a man drifting through life as he confronts his hidden family history. As accessible as pop fiction, Gerard's novel is a provocatively imagined emotional and psychological tale.

Nicholas Wolf works for NorthAm, an independent oil outfit. Helping to “soften the footprint, minimize the disruption” where NorthAm drills, Wolf is the “company storyteller,” his work part PR, part on-the-scene reporter to his home office. Wolf and Fannon, a project manager, are dispatched to Hatteras Island on North Carolina's Outer Banks. As they survey offshore prospects, the pair meet resistance, sometimes violent, not the least of all because of a secret linked to Wolf's grandfather, a German immigrant who left the US to fight for the Nazis. Wolf soon begins to feel he's “in a foreign country without a fixer.”

The character-driven narrative circles around Wolf, island patriarch Liam Royal, and Liam's granddaughter, Julia, a young divorcée who returns to the island reluctantly. Snappish and quick to anger, Julia's hard shell is sketched in a few words. Forever walking the beach, treasuring his granddaughter, Liam's angst and guilt are more deeply layered and are revealed slowly as being related to the foundation of his wealth. Wolf is a forty-something independent man whose character grows more empathetic via anecdotal flashbacks, beginning with Wolf's youth, when he lived with his grandmother and her “constant state of reminiscence or anticipation.” Oma represents misspent love, with Wolf nearly doomed to follow. Although Gerard makes only minor allusions to racial oppression, the descendants of Isaac Lord, near cliché as a beloved African American preacher, become narrative catalysts, as does Fannon, at first amiable, then mysterious, broadening the nicely paced story.

Hatteras and the sea are wonderfully rendered. The narrative rests ashore on the once-isolated island of “Mooncussers and wreckers,” who now must cater to tourism. Gerard's descriptions of trips to and from the offshore rig, and life aboard the rig, where the great steel beast will “shift and shimmy” in the wind, are visceral.

Greed, regret, deceit, and betrayals drive the mystery, but Gerard's addition of a realistic love story and his literary, often emotionally charged, writing make this a worthwhile read.

GARY PRESLEY (Summer 2016)

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