

The Kudzu Queen

Mimi Herman

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In Mimi Herman's lush historical novel *The Kudzu Queen*, a clever Southern teenager's sense of justice inspires her to expose the truth about a magnetic newcomer.

Mattie is fifteen and feeling eager for change when she and the rest of the town meet Mr. Cullowee. He's a blonde smooth-talker who promises that kudzu is a "miracle" cash crop that's sure to replace cotton and that one of the local girls will be crowned as the Kudzu Queen. People are naïve about the vine; they believe that it can prevent soil erosion.

Inspired by Mr. Cullowee, Mattie and her brother plant kudzu cuttings. Meanwhile, their community is abuzz about the showy soothsayer. As Mattie's crush on him grows, she longs to win his favor. She is both precocious and innocent; her everyday concerns include her friendships and a deportment class. But despite her active imagination and her tendency to be persuaded, she develops doubts about Mr. Cullowee's true nature. Tragedies force her to mature and to act with purpose.

Here, growth can be insidious, which is true both for Mattie and when it comes to kudzu. As the crop overruns its surroundings, Mr. Cullowee's big personality and lack of boundaries come into further question. Rational people are less eager than Mr. Cullowee's converts to accept what they hear. There are background suggestions of covered-up secrets, too. But the town's mother-daughter relationships offer reprieve from these goings-on, and general strength and selflessness help to reorient people toward what's right.

The Kudzu Queen is a fascinating historical novel in which an ambitious charlatan faces comeuppance thanks to a girl who loves her home and neighbors.

KAREN RIGBY (January / February 2023)

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