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Foreword Review MYSTERY

The Merciful

Jon Sealy
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When a hit-and-run kills a South Carolina teenager who was bicycling after dark, the fallout leads a community to ruminate. Jon Sealy's *The Merciful* is a searing novel in which public judgments and personal reckonings spiral from a single moment.

After Samantha's death, Daniel, the driver, claims that he struck a deer, though doubts swirl about whether he was inebriated. Jay, the narrator, seizes on the news as a mental distraction from his own life, and because he's fascinated that such an event could befall his former roommate. In this multiperspective plot, memories circle back to the present, up through to the trial and its immediate aftermath. Throughout, cumulative disappointments peel back the façade of the affluent coastal town, whose fragile surfaces are tactile and haunting.

Portraits of adults at personal crossroads intersect with each character's connection to the polarizing incident, which left some folks victim blaming and others convinced that Daniel is a murderer. Prominent in the story are Claire, a prosecutor who wants to redeem her career, and Henry, a defense lawyer whose brush with online vitriol beleaguers him. Daniel's wife and Samantha's boyfriend also factor in. There are lovers who've outgrown one another and careers that never reached their once imagined heights. There are instances of settling and lacks of morale. Emotional stagnation is apparent, too, as all live through the far-from-straightforward case—one Daniel comes to regard as the American "Potemkin village put on for show."

The novel's connections represent a potent cross section of modern relationships, all framed within a tech-saturated world in which strangers' comments are plentiful and often cruel. With astute, interwoven dramas that add up to a sobering tale, *The Merciful* is a novel that knows that victims and perpetrators are seldom one-dimensional.

KAREN RIGBY (January / February 2021)

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