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The Precious Jules

Shawn Nocher
Blackstone Publishing (Jun 28, 2022)
Hardcover $28.99 (350pp)
978-1-09-405831-3

A Maryland family navigates the return of their institutionalized daughter in *The Precious Jules*, Shawn Nocher's contemplative novel about duty, love, and sibling fears.

Thirty-two years ago, Ella Jules—a child challenged because of an accident at birth—was sent by her parents to the Beechwood Institute, where Lynetta, a staff member, grew to be her fond guardian. Now, upon the institute's closure in 2009, Ella's parents start the legal process to reclaim her. Meanwhile, Ella's bewildered adult siblings—including her beautiful twin; her youngest sister, who's never met her; and her brothers—converge on the family homestead, each with lingering doubts about the wisdom of Ella's return.

Alternating perspectives spanning decades depict how Ella's absence shaped each member of the Jules clan; the harsh, outdated practices inside of Beechwood, and its kudzu-entangled decline; and the past's lingering effects. A haunting story concerned with a family's outward perfection, and their hidden guilt about the deliberate estrangement of one of their own, this keen, emotional story crescendos when a traumatic memory is revealed.

The Jules's reactions range from residual terror about Ella's former violent outbursts, to loss, resignation, sympathy, and maternal pain; their experiences inform their present perspectives, imbuing the telling with shameful self-justifications and difficult love. The siblings' current love relationships, too, bear the imprints of Ella's banishment.

Without glossing over the challenges that are involved in taking care of a special needs child, the novel is wise about people's reluctance to admit darker emotions, even while they ache for understanding. Throughout, Lynetta stands out as the person who has known Ella the best; her sections are a poignant exploration of loyal attachment.

The Precious Jules is a captivating family novel about impossible atonement and learning to accept the natural outcomes of rending decisions.

KAREN RIGBY (May / June 2022)

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