

The Reservoir

John Milliken Thompson

Other Press (June 2011)

Softcover \$15.95 (368pp)

978-1-59051-444-3

The fluidity of the bonds of brotherhood and faith are examined in John Milliken Thompson's first novel, *The Reservoir*, which is based on a true story and focuses on the lives of brothers Tommie and Willie Cluverius in 1885 Richmond, Virginia. One early spring morning, the body of their cousin Lillie Madison—who was eight months pregnant—is discovered floating in the city's reservoir. When suspicion falls on Tommie, the loyal and practical Willie begins to doubt his status-seeking brother, a rising legal star.

The Richmond of 1885 is just starting to get back on its feet after the Civil War, and Thompson liberally splashes historical details throughout the pages. Lamplighters walk down the street at night, illuminating the city's byways, horses and buggies traverse dusty dirt roads, and all manner of fancy feathered hats and dashing suits are dappled throughout the upper crust of Richmond society. But under all the pretty details, dark secrets abound: the lurid truth about Lillie's abusive father; the abandonment of Willie and Tommie by their mother and father; and the mysterious death of their younger brother Charles.

When Willie notes the contrasts between the city and the environs at his country home, it's almost as if he's describing the temperaments of himself and his brother—the slick city dweller and the simple, hardworking country boy: "In the city it is as if you are walking on the graves of a thousand thousand people—all stone and concrete and the ghost of an older city that was built, in turn, upon some earlier version of itself. At home you walk on land that feels cleansed by the tide and the rain and the dew, the earth opening like a hand to feed you, if you know how to coax it."

Thompson, a native Southerner, is the author of *America's Historic Trails* and *Wildlands of the Upper South*, and his articles and short stories have been published in the *Washington Post*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *Louisiana Literature*.

It's evident that Thompson did his research while compiling the book. Many of the novel's characters are based on real people, and some of the courtroom dialogue is taken straight from newspaper accounts of the day. But it's that copious amount of research that, while admirable, also makes the middle section of the book drag. The courtroom holds so many witnesses and jurists that at times it's hard to keep track of them all. But fans of courtroom drama, historical mysteries, and Southern gothic are sure to enjoy the tale which, even once the book is finished, will keep readers wondering about what happened at the reservoir.

DANA RAE LAVERTY (May / June 2011)

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