



The Salt Fields

Stacy D. Flood

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In Stacy D. Flood's brooding historical novel *The Salt Fields*, a Black man migrates from the South and journeys inward toward reconciliation.

In 1947, Minister boards the Dawn Lightning to flee the Carolinas, where his ancestors were slaves, his wife was murdered, and his daughter drowned. Lanah and Divinion, a couple whose raw energy bristles against their outward refinement, and Carvall, a veteran, join him. With the train trip as a coiled, fascinating frame that branches to include character-defining stops in dreamlike locales that feel frozen in time, the travelers' ideas about starting new lives in the North change. They are aware that there's no escaping from the South, which is "nothing but a scar with some salt on it;" this becomes a poignant theme. Flood's fertile descriptions of the passing scenery are weighted with history, including visions of lynching.

Minister's intense impressions result in spare, charged dialogues with other passengers and dark, lingering puzzlement about their real intentions. Minister, who at first tries to stay out of the others' circles, is drawn in by light-skinned Lanah's confident allure. While revealing little about himself, he discovers that Lanah has bigger, secretive plans; Divinion hails from a lucky background; and Carvall, for all of his friendliness, is traumatized by an incident from the war. When Divinion's cavalier selfishness almost causes harm, mistrust simmers.

Later, in old age, Minister looks back on his own story, and on his travels by train, to discern that the world can, and does, survive everyone. In the ambiguous conclusion that hints at resignation and freedom, Minister's tragic experiences and deliberate separateness fold into a thought-provoking meditation about endurance.

Immersive because of its singular point-of-view and laced with astute observations about people, *The Salt Fields* is a bewitching, dangerous, and atmospheric novel.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2021)

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