

The Strange Side of the Tracks: A Novel

George Avant

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This redemptive journey is a tenderly written, playful, yet surprisingly deep story.

In this humorous and intriguing tale of a young boy's forays into family history and first love, author George Avant charms with the savvy workings of a plucky adolescent mind in *The Strange Side of the Tracks*.

Lonnie Tobin has had enough of a perpetually drunk and emotionally absent father, and when his mother is shoved by his dad one day, he convinces her to leave. They end up in her hometown, a quiet former boomtown with relatives scattered about. Industrious Lonnie sets off to unravel several local mysteries: Is his great-grandmother's house haunted? Does a ghost taunt a local couple? And, most significantly, did someone murder his grandfather?

The search for answers drives the story, along with Lonnie's conversations with an eclectic cast of characters. One of the more engaging is his brain-damaged step-grandfather, whose occasional profound statements break through an otherwise quiet life. As events unfold, Lonnie realizes the mysterious utterances are, in fact, premonitions. Supporting characters are Lonnie's faithful dog and sidekick, Sawbuck, and the preacher's daughter, Nelda. The essence of boyhood envelops the story—baseball, bullies, beautiful girls, and lazy hours with dog afoot.

The opening sentence—"I slipped a hollow-point bullet into my Remington single shot, .22 rifle and took a deep breath"—opens up Lonnie's world and captures interest as the adventure begins. The journey is tenderly written, playful, yet surprisingly deep, showing appreciation of nature, history, and elderly relatives who are gateways to the past. Avant's graceful writing style creates a tone reminiscent of another forthright story of adolescence, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It's truly a loss that the book was published posthumously and there will be no more joyous use of language from Avant's nimble mind.

The brooding cover should instead reflect the felicity of the story, which it could do by featuring an illustration or photo of a boy and his faithful dog. Currently, the group of men on the dark-toned cover is barely visible, and the railroad tracks in the foreground aren't necessary.

Young adults, history and nature lovers, and anyone who enjoys a touching, adventurous and redemptive tale will love this story.

FELICIA TOPP (May 1, 2015)

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