

The Thorns of Aiden

TE Grainger

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Dr. T.E. Grainger, who holds a Doctorate of Ministry from the University of South Carolina, draws on a lifetime of theological education and experience to write this novel, a spiritual allegory wrapped in a spiritualism that can only be found in the Old South. The story tells the trials and tribulations of Charlton Pierce, a child who was apparently born out of wedlock to an otherwise respectable, but poor, young woman. Charlton carries the label “bastard,” with all of the social and cultural implications that come with it in rural America during the mid-1940s. Add to that the inequalities of a community hierarchy based upon wealth and familial aristocracy, and Pierce shoulders a heavy burden from the moment of his birth.

Like guardian angels, an African American couple known affectionately as Aunt Belle and Uncle Ed take on the responsibility of mentoring this child and teaching him ways to overcome the problems he faces. The image of a black couple raising the young white master seems a throwback to the antebellum South.

Grainger uses this aging couple as a vehicle for voicing advice and counsel meant for readers as well as young Charlton, but he never lectures or intrudes on the story. He integrates philosophy and theology into the novel through tales and parables. Couched in the soft, humble words of rural Southern dialect, the advice falls gently and is easily accepted and digested. When young Charlton asks Ed why we can't fly like birds and skeeters, Ed replies:

“Well, it's funny you ask that. Jest this mornin, I heard a boy skeeter talkin to his daddy skeeter an you know what he was askin him?...He was askin him, “Daddy, who idea it was to put hands on a man an tails on a cow?””

The boy listens, obeys, and grows into an intelligent, athletic, moral, and hard-working young man. Along the way he endures the trials of Hercules—or, perhaps more accurately, of Job.

There is a certain humbleness and purity of spirit here that keeps this book from becoming just another lecture on religion. In fact, it pulls from some unorthodox sources to pursue a line of thought that transcends the rote aspects of religion and ascends to the spirit of belief. For example, Uncle Ed has the “sight” and can predict a person's future. His wife, a midwife, glimpses the coming life of the child as she brings it into the world.

Although the writing borders on reportage and fictional techniques could be better utilized, the narrative voice remains steady and conveys a feel-good story. One nit involves a consistency issue. Throughout the book wealth and power are equated with evil, yet the final reward is wealth and prestige.

The author includes notes at the end to point out obscure allusions in the text. Readers of light religious novels, Pilgrim's Progress, and Robinson Crusoe will enjoy this happily-ever-after novel.

DAWN GOLDSMITH (July 1, 2010)

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