



The Winter Sisters

Tim Westover

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The Winter Sisters is an entertaining historical fantasy in which lives change and minds open.

Tim Westover's eccentric novel *The Winter Sisters*, pits Hippocratic medicine against folk remedies with tall-tale flair.

The story is set in Lawrenceville, Georgia—a town it calls a “hog-cursed, mud-soaked, huckster-plagued little hamlet”—in the early nineteenth century. There, a penniless physician, Doctor Waycross, faces rumors of a rabid panther. He forms a tense alliance with a preacher, Boatwright, who thinks that the Winter sisters are witches.

Waycross hopes to convince the townspeople that they need him, but most find him suspect. They prefer the sisters as healers. Meanwhile, a snake-oil salesman hawks useless tonics, and the elusive panther prowls the woods. When events lead to Waycross banding together with the sisters in a makeshift clinic in town, Boatwright's vitriol intensifies. Later sections draw on Effie Winter's inexplicable healing power, raising questions about whether or not miracles happen.

Waycross is an original whose initial skepticism, contempt, and pride yield to a softer stance. He can't abide quackery in others, but lets it slide within himself. Much of the book's humor stems from the discrepancy between his outlook and what the audience knows—that his belief in the four humors and his go-to solution for everything, bloodletting, are more questionable than the sisters' herbs and poultices. He learns to appreciate their sometimes unconventional, holistic approach when he sees that they're effective. How he comes around to changing his views is handled with care.

The writing embodies Waycross's initial pomposity, employing delightful terms like “prestidigitation” that create an exasperated air around the doctor. There are also humble moments, including an amputation for a patient who may not have needed it. Other characters, including Sarah Winter, are dynamic and contribute levity to the story. Sarah's penchant for inventing stories to make people feel better comes across as impish and wise.

Care is taken with the scene setting, portraying Lawrenceville as a tight-knit community through character encounters on its main thoroughfare and in its shops. The Winter sisters' remote cottage is picturesque and surprises Waycross with its normalcy. Amid Lawrenceville's shenanigans and swirling fears, a witty, tender story arises and unexpected partnerships form. The denouement leaves a few open ends, though, particularly when it comes to Effie Winter.

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KAREN RIGBY (September 11, 2019)

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