



Their Houses

Meredith Sue Willis

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A foreboding tale of longing for solace ignites the rural West Virginia setting of Meredith Sue Willis's *Their Houses*.

Dinah and Grace are sisters whose childhood was marked by their father's alcoholism and their mother's psychosis. Now married with families of their own, they've found ways to suppress their memories. Dinah anchors herself in devotion to her fire-and-brimstone preacher of a husband, while Grace clings to the hope that Dinah will make her home nearby.

Richie—an ailing childhood companion whose narcissism leads him to seek out Dinah—complicates the plot with a bold plan laced with over-the-top measures. Deftly handled characters with checkered pasts and subtle humor keep the pathos at bay.

Alternating perspectives depict lives bound by fear and luck. Against the decadent backdrop of the estate that Richie, Dinah, and Grace meet on, a friendship springs from Dinah's pity and is fanned by Richie's devotion. Once everyone grows up, it's clear that the balance between them was never equal.

The heartbreaking crux of the story rests in the gulf between what characters want to believe and what reality proves—particularly when it comes to Richie's view of Dinah as a protective rescuer. Suspense builds through well-timed revelations; when adult Richie's plans veer off course, the results highlight how much easier it would be to tell the truth.

Amid rash decisions made under the guise of love, Grace's husband provides an effective counterpoint to the other men and women in the book, who seem to act without considering the harm they may inflict. He's the most grounded character: fully aware of Grace's depressive episodes, at times bewildered, and ultimately rational. Other highlights include Aleda, Dinah's eldest daughter, who is a bridge between Dinah's past and present, and whose curiosity opens a new path for her family.

Their Houses takes wild turns through even wilder landscapes to expose familiar loneliness. Richie's need to manipulate circumstances becomes a canvas for a surprisingly tender portrait of the bonds that keep friends and families afloat.

KAREN RIGBY (July/August 2018)

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