

These You Know

William Pope

Book Baby

(282pp)

978-1-09-836124-2

Characters tell elaborate, proud stories about their lives in the Southern short story collection These You Know.

In William Pope's provocative short story collection *These You Know*, people's Southern roots expose tribalism, moral quandaries, deep-seated beliefs, and defiant love.

In the opening story, a father anticipates using his wealth to be philanthropic, but he also has to contend with his grief. Elsewhere, a matriarch shuns her son's lover until a rare condition places her in the same girl's path. In both entries, parents desire what's best for their children, though their expectations are fueled by ideas about who deserves good outcomes in life.

Other stories concern ingrained mindsets and racial injustice. In one satirical tale, a wry, accomplished man tries to write a story about these issues; he's clear in articulating them, though he also engages in punditry, pointing out the hypocrisy of holding Christian ideals and slavery in tandem. Even as he tackles weighty realities, though, he succumbs to the weight of his own white guilt; the story concludes in an abrupt manner, with situational comeuppance.

Elsewhere, a homeless, frugal mother works at a junkyard, hoards money, and is more than she seems to be due to having followed wise advice. Her desire to provide for her missing daughter drives her; the story builds toward an uplifting, serendipitous revelation. But this is a deviation among stories that are often dark and in which people are more prone to face the consequences of their past, rash decisions.

These character-focused stories either give their heroes the floor or afford it to bemused raconteurs who recall curious incidents and summarize individual, checkered histories. Some people are absorbed by their public images; people in relationships meet with the disapproval of others; there are instances of infidelity; and outwardly upstanding people hide simmering secrets. People behave in inconsistent ways; some are driven by passion. The resultant picture of the South is one of a place in which people tell themselves elaborate, proud stories to keep their worlds in order.

Indeed, throughout the book, Southern habits and mores are the fodder for humor; they lead to instances of biting justice. But there are also instances in which the stories feature jarring conclusions and unexamined instances of cruelty, as when a lawyer manipulates his at-risk clients for his family's benefit, or when other tales' conclusions pivot on quick, fateful revelations. Some of the book's epiphanies are underdeveloped, coming to characters who don't seem self-aware enough to receive them.

Featuring instances of outlandish hubris and vulnerability, *These You Know* is an entertaining short story collection in which Southern people embrace and confront their own shadowy natures.

KAREN RIGBY (April 15, 2023)

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