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General

Truth: Four Stories I am Finally Old Enough to Tell
Ellen Douglas
Algonquin
978-1-56512-214-7
(January 9, 1998)

The words “truth” and “stories” in the title of this bold, subversive book should alert the wary reader and, more especially, the flummoxed library cataloguer that Ellen Douglas, after four decades of acclaimed fiction, is boxing clever with this quartet of tales from her recent and more distant past. An uncle comes to the author’s house to die in “Grant,” hiring a pretty black woman to watch over him in his decline, and relegating some of his closest family members to the uneasy role of spectators. “On Second Creek,” 30 Mississippi slaves are tortured and murdered after some ethereal talk of rebellion. Among the slave owners and presumably their murderers may or may not lurk several of the writer’s distant ancestors with elusive pasts.

If the title character in “Grant” is maddeningly distant, so too is the onetime family chauffeur in “Hampton,” a black man recalling his life of servitude with aloof calm and an impenetrable reserve. In “Julia and Nellie” Douglas makes her only narrative stumble with a cluttered tale of near-incestuous family couplings that, with a flurry of genealogical detail, leaves the reader reeling from the start.

All four works evoke the rural South in lush and evocative tones; decrepit mansions and half-completed follies, gnarled cypress roots soaking in the slow-moving delta waters. Ellen Douglas may have arrived at the second half of her seventies, but her storytelling prowess is clearly that of a woman at the height of her considerable powers. How much of Truth is actually true is also her closely kept secret. Douglas is the author of seven previous books, including *Apostles of Light*, a finalist for the National Book Award.