

Watershed

Mark Barr

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In Mark Barr's engrossing historical novel *Watershed*, personal and social changes lead to tension in a rural Tennessee town where a post-Depression federal dam project brings work, strangers, and electricity to the region.

Claire is a young mother recovering from a low point and a debilitating sickness, working toward personal awakening. She experiences a thrilling series of firsts—the possibility of a first paycheck; a first look at Memphis on the horizon. Then Nathan takes a room in her aunt's boarding house. He's hoping for a job in the engineering office and to escape a personal tragedy. Neither Claire nor Nathan is sure about trusting the other, but it's clear that neither can go back to the way things used to be.

Meanwhile, the weather heats up, scenes become sweaty, and the benefits of electricity become more apparent. Rippling contrasts exist between the townsfolk and outsiders, and a few characters teeter on the edge of menace or violence. Claire and Nathan negotiate relationships that they're unsure of at work and at the boarding house. Scenes with Claire's mother, who embraces the old values that Claire is leaving behind, are always interesting. The friendship between Nathan and a rough local, Freitag, develops in a way that is earnest and touching.

A clear narrative voice is equally at home with the book's country folks and city people. Great historical and regional details come in, including of vehicles, clothing, and preelectric housekeeping. Nathan, observing the dam's progress, says that "It was a pleasure to see a grand thing made," and it's a pleasure to read about it, too. The dam's holdups raise the stakes of the story, and waiting to learn the characters' fates, which are wrapped up in the success of the project, makes this historical tale gripping.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (September / October 2019)

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