Clarion Review

General

We All Hear Voices
Sam Taggart
iUniverse
978-1-4401-0848-8
Four Stars (out of Five)

We All Hear Voices, a Southern Gothic novel by physician Sam Taggart, revolves around the life of Jack, an older, quiet, little man who hops off a bus one day with his duffel bag in a dusty Arkansas town. He quickly finds work as a diner cook and breathes new life into the menu and the diner's finances.

Jack has the ability to visualize and smell how his down-home dishes will taste as he begins to chop and stir. Taggart describes his culinary synesthesia as a gradual leveling off of the sharp points of various ingredients as they cook. A chocolate cake's sharp edges are tempered by Jack with the smooth quietness and warmth of lavender; hot peppers release their knifelike points and a cloud of reddish orange sound as they grill. Jack's cooking prowess comes at a price, however, as he also hears voices that carp at him from inside his stove and from inside his own head.

Taggart creates an intriguingly eccentric cast of characters with Jack's workplace, Moon's Bar and Grill, as their base. Albert Moon, the diner's owner, is a gambling addict whose head is full of money-making schemes and dreams financed by skimming the till. Big-hearted waitress Mary Ann keeps tabs on Jack when the voices get too demanding and keeps Moon in check. Other characters include fortune-telling Sylvia who has a crop of bottle trees in her backyard; Richard, the rice farmer by day and stock-car racing champion by night; the legendary lawyer Powhatan Jay Ives; and a bar full of wise-cracking patrons. All are interesting in their own right, with their own mix of personal tragedies and unfulfilled dreams.

Throughout the book, the details of Jack's pre-diner life unravel, and Taggart interweaves chapters from various eras and locations with ease. In his descriptions of characters in halfway houses, mental institutions, and other humble stations in life he reveals a compassion that must make him an empathetic and comforting physician.

A ham-handed sex scene ("You are one hell of a man, and you have the finest touch I have ever experienced") and occasional bouts of overwritten prose are minor discordant notes. Overall, however, Taggart's novel is an engaging story with unusual character studies, a multi-layered plot, and a bit of mystery. Fans who enjoy fiction by Southern writers will doubtless enjoy this novel which sits somewhere along the spectrum between the geniality of Fannie Flagg and the darker world of James Lee Burke.