

Winter's Reckoning

Adele Holmes

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Winter's Reckoning is a folksy historical novel in which a local healer cements her determination to forge a better future.

In Adele Holmes's enchanting historical novel, an Appalachian herbalist's concern for her family and neighbors fuels discontent among the town's men.

In the early 1900s, a new pastor, Carl, comes to Jamesville. He preaches about segregation, which causes Maddie concern: she has a reputation for healing, and she shares her skills on both sides of town. She hopes to pass this legacy on to her granddaughter, Hannah, too. But as the Ku Klux Klan experiences a resurgence in Jamesville, Maddie's apprentice, Ren, is threatened for being Black, and Maddie has to consider her family's legacy in the town.

Maddie and Ren are developed in terms of their committed friendships with each other. They face misunderstandings: at times, Maddie's white privilege obscures her comprehension of what Ren's life is like, and she struggles to understand that "acknowledging evil is not enough." But the difficulties that they face force her growth. They have tough encounters as they gather herbs, make their rounds, face disapproval about being together on public roads, and confront the KKK. They are scapegoated and face insinuations that their work amounts to witchcraft, even from those who have benefited from it. The novel is keen in noting such salient instances of hypocrisy. Its KKK characters are chilling: they rely on anonymity, but Maddie knows which of her neighbors joined the organization, and their betrayals are clear.

Conversely, Hannah is developed in terms of her naïve but stalwart views about fairness; her observations in this arena lean into clichés. And Carl is an inconsistent foil to Maddie and her crowd, both mired in his pride and prone to pursuits that run counter to his vocation. He misuses the power of his pulpit. A principled newsman is also present in the cast, but he is under used for much of the book—until he assumes a critical role later on.

As the story progresses, it mixes realistic and frightening situations with lighter scenes that represent narrative reprieve. The topic of racial discord is focal throughout, but it is handled with care. The story's stakes rise during a blizzard that stirs up secrets between the town's women—and during which an injury leads to some suspense. But women's wisdom is the most consistent narrative device, pulling the townspeople through the divisions that plague them. Once Maddie and Ren reveal the preacher's hidden troubles, atypical hijinks ensue.

Ignorance fosters fear in *Winter's Reckoning*, a folksy novel in which a local healer cements her determination to forge a better future.

KAREN RIGBY (July 1, 2022)

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