



Boy with Wings

Mark Mustian

Köehler Books

(332pp)

979-888824428-9

An evocative historical novel that celebrates distinctive individuals in the Depression-era South.

In Mark Mustian's riveting historical novel *Boy with Wings*, a man's strange birthmark and winged appendages force him to live as both an outcast and a celebrated oddity.

Born to a single mother in a Southern town, Johnny has striking green eyes and a large, peculiar mark on his back. From a young age, he hears people condemn his birthmark as an evil sign. He also begins to develop defined growths near his shoulder blades, forming what appear to be "stretching, sprouting wings."

After his mother's death, orphaned Johnny is cared for by a community of Black laborers. This stable environment is disrupted when local white men object to the impropriety of a white boy living among "darkies." Later chained in a Georgia farmhouse and sexually exploited, Johnny is liberated by gun-toting Tiny Tot, a dwarf who manages a "freak show." Tot offers Johnny a place in her touring company.

Tot's troupe is an immersive, fascinating society featuring tattooed and bearded ladies, a fire-breathing sword swallower, "pinheads," and ventriloquists. As the show's closing attraction, Johnny is promoted as being "one of the eight living wonders of the world." He develops relationships with his coworkers and forms a mutual attraction with Winifred, Tot's "normal" daughter.

Beyond the group's camaraderie are interpersonal conflicts that are heightened by the economic uncertainties of the Great Depression. Johnny learns that Tot's concern and care have a mercenary element, too. She is the beneficiary of an insurance policy that provides financial compensation in the event of his death.

The book is narrated with controlled tension and via perspective shifts, but Johnny is its primary focus. Intelligent and inquisitive, he is portrayed with compassion and complexity. He tries to forget the trauma and abuse he has endured; he wonders about the identity of his father. He often comes to the aid of other persecuted beings, from his defense of a monkey in the freak show to his forceful intervention to stop a lynching. He longs for the anonymity of an unremarkable existence.

After leaving the show, Johnny wanders with rootless confusion, trying to bind and conceal his wings. He plots to confront his father, who has achieved notable political success through intimidation, corruption, and moral duplicity. Johnny's identity becomes more ambiguous in time with these shifts: Though his wings are flesh with muscular tissue, they seem to develop a feathery covering as his contempt for corrupt, cruel, and prejudiced individuals intensifies.

The South is established via lush details of tangled vines and pine and cypress trees. Beyond such verdant features is menace: Racial intolerance and religious hypocrisy mark Johnny's society, as do threats of injustice and violence that seems to require equal violence to correct. As an emerging figure of dark retribution, Johnny's actions are surrealistic. Following a fierce ambush, the tone shifts: Johnny is given a more profound, purposeful role, though this new path is somewhat vague. Still, *Boy with Wings* is an evocative historical novel that celebrates distinctive individuals in the

Depression-era South.

MEG NOLA (January 7, 2025)

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