



Down the Steep

A. D. Nauman

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In A. D. Nauman's unflinching bildungsroman *Down the Steep*, a girl struggles with her morality during the civil rights movement.

In 1963 Virginia, Willa wants nothing more than to impress her father. He happens to be an influential member of the local KKK, but she's blind to their extreme hatred and violence. But then Ruth, a minister's wife and Willa's new neighbor from the north, invites Langston, a young Black man, into her home. Ruth is eager to help both Willa and Langston with their studies. However, her students' innate distrust toward each other leads Langston to reveal a disastrous secret about Willa's father. It disrupts the headstrong teenager's naïveté: Willa begins doubting her father and all that he stands for. She attempts to reveal the secret, but this puts her life—and Langston's—in danger.

The narration is rearward-gazing, with Willa reflecting on her formative experiences after leaving home; she continues to feel an ingrained distrust of others. She knows that racism wasn't the only disease that her father fostered in his family and community: he expressed hatred toward anyone who made him feel less than, including women. The juxtaposition of the book's beautiful depictions of neighborhood flowers and charming mother-daughter conversations with casual disparagement and vile commentary is stark. And later, while working as a college professor, Willa states that "white supremacy comes in waves...that kind of hatred never truly goes away."

Set during a period of intense upheaval, *Down the Steep* is a wrenching coming-of-age tale in which an independent teenager strives to do her best in a harsh social climate wherein hatred takes insidious root.

JOHN M. MURRAY (September / October 2023)

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