

## Drowned Town

**Jayne Moore Waldrop**

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In western Kentucky, towns along the Cumberland River were replaced by Lake Barkley during a dam project. Residents were told “their sacrifice was for the public good.” Jayne Moore Waldrop’s novel *Drowned Town* is about what they weren’t told: “how much they would miss” their towns, “for how long,” and how to navigate new ground once all prior landmarks are washed away.

Narrators rise and fall with the tide as the novel investigates the lake’s effect from multiple perspectives, like that of a farmer whose family bought land after being freed from slavery; and that of the realtor charged with completing government buyout valuations. The Wetherfords, a family from a drowned town, and two close family friends form the narrative core. All wrestle with the impermanence of their homes and histories.

More often than not, the book considers both what’s lost and what’s found. Its story lines move in a give-and-take as couples are widowed or divorced, marry or find new loves; found families are embraced, and parents succumb to the ailments of age; and life opens up just when long-held ambitions crumble. But not all that is put into motion is resolved. Like the drowned towns themselves, some stories, like the mystery of a missing wife and daughter, just disappear.

While repetitive in regards to background information and other details, the novel’s shifts between characters and time periods, from the beginning of the dam project to a contemporary moment, create a swirling, circular pacing that reflects the collapsed history of those who straddle the land’s past and present. Once all evidence of human habitation is bulldozed to make way for the lake and recreation area, what the novel *Drowned Town* memorializes is a landscape in which, for successive generations, beauty is “intertwined with loss and sorrow.”

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (September / October 2021)

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