

## Prodigal

**Phyllis Gobbell**

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Phyllis Gobbell's novel *Prodigal* tells a parabolic story of homecoming in a Southern small town.

Connor, a preacher's son, is cast adrift after becoming an accomplice in the Independence Day shooting of a convenience store clerk. He goes on the run and stays away from his Tennessee hometown for a decade. The Fourth of July, which he once loved, becomes a dreaded anniversary; its popping sounds evolve in meaning.

Then Connor's grandmother dies and names him in her will. Haunted by what happened and still blamed by the townspeople for the death, he is forced to confront his past and face family secrets. He hangs drywall, lives in motels, mends relationships, and settles his debts before seeking forgiveness and finding an opening for it.

The chapters are narrated from the points of view of different characters, including generations of Connor's family members: the ornery matriarch Lady; academic Ivy; and Connor's mother, Kitty, an unlikely preacher's wife. Their stories form a patchwork of varying perspectives through which thorny family secrets, lies, and betrayals are revealed.

The book is steeped in place, with the South vivified in details of the summer, supper tables, sweet tea, preachers, and prison tattoos. People's conversations reflect the local dialect, further grounding the story in its setting of languid afternoons and declining courthouse squares. Rich observations about meddling in others' affairs, penning vehement letters to the editor, and putting on a pastor face result in added depth. Themes of shame, guilt, and ostracism are explored with psychological acuity leading up to the book's ending, in which Connor stumbles upon a crime and an opportunity for the redemption he pines for.

In the affecting novel *Prodigal*, a lost son finds his way home.

JOSEPH S. PETE (November / December 2024)

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