

The Johnson Place: A Rappahannock County Story

J. Stewart Willis

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A piece of land tied to an unsavory family history wallows and declines in the decades-long historical novel The Johnson Place.

A tract of land near the Blue Ridge mountains inspires *The Johnson Place*, J. Stewart Willis's multipart historical novel about a town's colorful inhabitants.

In 1848, James, a coarse ne'er-do-well, is disgruntled after his father's death: he was not bequeathed the family farm. James courts and marries a plain spinster, Alice, to use her family's money to buy out his estranged siblings' shares of the farm. Alice resigns herself to the fact that she was duped into living on the dilapidated homestead; James continues to be selfish in pursuing his own desires. He feels lust for his young niece, Mollie, too.

The years pass in swift form until James begins to pursue Mollie, now a teenager. She becomes his vixen mistress. An awkward triangle forms: Alice accepts that she's been supplanted, and the three attempt to work on the farm, though Mollie's presence fuels shameful speculation in town. After some outlandish twists, Mollie departs; James yearns after her, and they trade florid letters that reveal more about his infatuated entanglement with her. He leaves to try to regain her presence.

The characters' foibles are centered in the book's light narration, which also covers James's stubborn actions at length. This focus wears thin, though, and comes at the expense of some development. James and Alice's loveless marriage, for example, is covered via clipped episodes that render them actors in a folksy drama. And their exchanges become tedious as James's sense of discontent escalates; he worries over the expensive, unfulfilling course that his life has taken. When a crime makes the townsfolk clamor for vigilante justice, the book's pace quickens, moving the story toward a trial and a busy parade of witnesses. A pastiche of reportage and excerpted records further deepen the county's lore.

The book's second part is set one hundred years later; it's a brief chronicle covering the successive owners of the Johnson homestead. Because it ripples through genealogies and focuses on legal proceedings concerning administering property, audience interest wanes. The narrative concentrates on what replaced the old farm, its residents, and subsequent decades—details sketched in via summaries that lack a central character to bind them together. And part three covers the sale of the land to a ski club and later owners—also in in matter-of-fact terms, moving through the 1960s and 1970s. Dry accounts involving zoning and additional court cases mix with occasional conversations among interested parties about revitalization and development. The result is a distanced story working toward abrupt commentary regarding how history is forgotten if it isn't written down.

The circuitous historical novel *The Johnson Place* muses through decades of events on a single slice of land.

KAREN RIGBY (February 27, 2023)

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