



The Pale Flesh of Wood

Elizabeth A. Tucker

She Writes Press (Feb 11, 2025)

Softcover \$17.99 (320pp)

978-1-64742-834-1

Family stories and regrets drive a woman away from home and pull her back again in the affecting literary novel The Pale Flesh of Wood.

In Elizabeth A. Tucker's moving novel *The Pale Flesh of Wood*, a woman grapples with her family's troubled history.

The ancient oak that lords over Lyla's family's property is the site of mixed memories. It ties Lyla to her grandmother, who owns the land; her father, who died there; and her punishing mother. In time, it drives her away from home; later, it compels her to return.

Split into three parts, the book tracks the reasons for Lyla's departure, her time in Wyoming, and her return to California. The chapters focus on incidents that define Lyla's family's relationships: Lyla and her father hang a tire swing in the tree, and she attempts to prove herself by agreeing to the dangerous feats he directs; later, she steals her grandmother's cherished porcelain doll and expresses resentment over her grandmother's rules. A fight between Lyla and her mother when Lyla is a teenager precipitates her departure. When she returns in physical form to the place she could never truly leave, she feels a sense of grace and reassurance, recognizing her experiences of growth, death, and rebirth in keen terms.

The family's relationships are explored in the course of its members' coy, vicious, and humorous exchanges with one another, as well as through their internal thoughts. Their feelings are entangled and intense, and they are a codependent if multifaceted bunch. Lyla is curious about the world, loyal to her family members, and angry at her mother; her grandmother's stern facade belies her feelings of guilt. Lyla's mother, whom others dismiss as weak, has inner strength that flashes forward when she shows old family videos to Lyla, and Lyla's father is a captivating, heartbreaking figure. The book's secondary characterizations somewhat pale in comparison to the family's, including when it comes to the pair of siblings Lyla stays with in Wyoming; they are cast as mere foils to her family members.

The book's political and geographical landscapes are well attended to—thanks, in part, to the influence of Lyla's father, an amateur geologist who's interested not only in rocks and fossils but in “an investigation of how they change over time.” He teaches her about the stars, too, resulting in constancy when Orion is in view:

Unknown constellations filled the near-dawn sky—black holes, burned-out stars, and probably faraway myths that her father had never spoken of, never had the time to teach her about before he left.

World War II, the postwar period and its destruction of rural areas, and the Cold War all influence the book's progression. It moves toward a satisfying ending that's all about forgiveness and compassion, grounded in recognition of the overwhelming forces that threaten to break people.

The Pale Flesh of Wood is a nuanced literary novel about a family's intricate struggles with their legacies.

MARI CARLSON (October 15, 2024)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book and paid a small fee to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. Foreword Reviews and Clarion Reviews make no guarantee that the publisher will receive a positive review. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.