

You, From Below: A Novella

Em J Parsley

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Em J Parsley's *You, From Below* is a surrealist novella in which an Appalachian town is destroyed by a massive sinkhole.

After Mission disappears, You starts climbing into the mountains to deliver the letter in their pocket; it contains an urgent message. There is an Appalachian odyssey of sorts, taking them through several magical encounters with grotesque people: a woman fused with kudzu; and a preacher whose town appears to have been raptured.

Gothic and picaresque themes, reworked Appalachian folk tales, and the Bible factor into this exploration of the hidden fears, desires, and taboos of Southern culture. The kudzu woman's obsessive consumption replicates the same economic practices that allowed the invasive plant to grow uncontrolled. The section focused on the flooded and raptured town is a commentary on the apocalyptic perversity of American religion and echoes threats of climate disaster. Its allegorical turns evade direct translations, though. Still, the prose is surprising and sharp, evincing a keen eye for details: "Small routines continued: you made yourself get up before noon...briefly step out onto the porch...before the silence from down the road sank into your stomach."

While sketched with conviction, the book's conceit of characters one-way relaying their narratives to You results in little development or attachment to You for much of the novella's length. The repetitive structure is finally twisted in the last section when You encounters a vulture with a man's head. Here, the story turns inward, conveying a picture of grief in the wake of a mother's death, loneliness, and the need to view what's called "rapture and decay" as part of a larger cycle. It's a moving finale.

Unique and bizarre, *You, From Below* is a quest novella that's at once delightful and haunting.

SÉBASTIEN LUC BUTLER (January / February 2025)

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