

in print

FICTION

Mississippi burning

by Jason Smith

The Queen of Palmyra. By Minrose Gwin. Harper Perennial, 416 pages, \$14.99.

The icings were the thing. They had to be timed to the split second, or else they would turn into wet sugar grit. When that happened, Mama would get mad as fire and start yelling her worst curse word, which was "Damn it the hell." She said icing was like some folks' lives: Timing is everything and when things go bad they go really bad. They settle into sludge. They cannot be undone.

Small-town Mississippi, summer of 1963. Florence Forrest is a ten-year-old white girl. Her father, Win Forrest—that's "Forrest" with two R's, he says, like the great Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest—sells burial insurance door-to-door in Shake Rag, the black section of town, and spends his nights fuming and stomping off to secret meetings. Florence's mother is the town's cake lady—six-layer lemon with divinity icing, four-layer devil's

food with angel icing, three-layer white with caramel fudge. She sells them to other ladies for their Saturday matinee clubs and bridge parties and anniversaries. She spends her nights in a hot kitchen, baking and washing, baking and washing, and taking little nips of the liquor she buys from the black bootlegger across town. Florence waits and watches.

And she hears stories: her grandfather reads her Uncle Wiggily tales. Her father Win tells her stories about Bomba, a noble white boy living in the jungle surrounded by dull-witted, dark-skinned natives. And Zenie, the black maid of Florence's grandparents who looks after Florence on the side, tells her stories of the great Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, who would lead warriors into battle with one breast bared and who, when she was finally captured by the Romans, insisted that the chains that kept her prisoner be made of solid gold.

Florence, for her part, tells us her own story: she understands and misunderstands as only a child can, but we also hear from her as an adult. "I need you to understand how ordinary it all was," she begins.

Trouble starts when Zenie's niece Eva comes down from Raleigh to try to make a little money so she can enroll for another year of college. Eva starts to tutor Florence in parts of speech and diagramming sentences—Florence has missed some school because her father couldn't or wouldn't work at any one place for long, but she needs to get ready for fifth grade. When Eva also tries to sell burial insurance door-to-door in Shake Rag, someone attacks her and burns a hole into her cheek with a car's cigarette lighter.

Florence's mother, demoralized and sinking deeper into drink, accidentally-on-purpose drives one night into the path of an oncoming train. She's broken up enough to earn a long stay in the hospital and, after that, a longer one in a mental ward. Lying awake in bed one night, Florence decides she needs to keep her mother's cake business going. But when she sets the kitchen afire, the hate that has been simmering in Win Forrest boils over.

Gwin gives the book's saintly characters their share of foibles and flaws. And she develops even her most despicable character, Win, with the kind of patience and attention that keep us wondering who he really is, and why. "I wanted readers to discern what made Win such a terrible person, and to have a mixture of emotions for him," Gwin says. "I wanted that to mirror the mixed emotions that Florence has for him."

Some stories burn hot, cooking down quick and clean to a tidy, well-timed end. And some, like this one of Gwin's, smolder like a pot forgotten on the back of the stove, bubbling down to a dark, wet scab that won't scrub out.

Minrose Gwin is the Kenan Eminent Professor of English in the College of Arts and Sciences. The Queen of Palmyra is her first novel. Her memoir, Wishing for Snow, has just been released in paperback by Harper Perennial. For more information about Gwin and her work, go to minrosegwin.com.



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