
“[The study] smelled of an ever-welcoming past, of lost causes and unvanquished honor.” And, eventually, of 150 year-old gunpowder and shot.

At the beginning of our new century, shrewd Charlotte socialite Jerene Johnston is willing to do whatever it takes to protect her family’s reputation and to secure her children’s future. Her radical daughter Annie, her gay son Josh, her preacher son Bo, and her insecure daughter Jerilyn don’t make this easy. The Johnston family proudly traces its lineage to Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston, and Jerene’s husband Duke has abandoned all professional and political aspirations, preferring to reside in a world of nostalgia and Civil War reenactments.

Each chapter, focusing on one character’s story, is like a portrait hung in a gallery. In some of the paintings the character is front and center; in others the subject blends into the background as action takes over the foreground. The chapter about Bo provides insight into his character, but the scene of a melodramatic Christmas dinner is far more memorable.

Jerene’s children and husband are not her only worries. Her alcoholic brother Gaston makes his living writing popular Civil War novels, her sister Dillard has never recovered from a personal tragedy, and their mother Jeannette lives with the knowledge that she failed to protect her children. Add to the mix Josh’s best friend Dorrie, who’s African American and a lesbian, and Bo’s wife Kate who longs to return to the Peace Corps, and you have the perfect southern tragicomedy.

The title obviously refers to the song “Dixie” and there are other allusions as well. Characters are forced to look the other way when reality is inconvenient. Watching the events unfold is like driving by a gruesome car wreck or watching a reality TV show—we should mind our own business, but morbid curiosity prevents us from averting our gaze.

*Lookaway, Lookaway* is recommended for public libraries and academic libraries that collect Southern or North Carolina fiction. Peppered with interesting snippets of little-known North Carolina history—very few of them flattering—the book is as much scathing social commentary as it is fiction, making it an enlightening additional reading in social science classes examining the modern history of North Carolina and the South.

Wilton Barnhardt is director of the Masters in Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at North Carolina State University. His previous novels include *Emma Who Saved My Life, Gospel*, and *Show World*.

*Lookaway, Lookaway* isn’t being released until August, but that’s okay because it is not a summer beach read. It’s an autumn book to be savored, one to read next to a cozy fire with a cup of hot tea.

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