
“How many times can you reinvent yourself? She got away with it once, but when her husband Joel died, so did Karen Godwell, leaving no one but the steely mountain girl she buried inside her the day she walked into the freshman dorm at North Carolina’s Salem College.”

When art curator Karen Godwell leaves New York City to return to her hometown of Fairview, North Carolina, she is forced to confront the demons of both her past and her present. Supported by her precocious nine year-old daughter Hali, she sets out to wrest control of her grandmother’s farm from her brother Travis. Travis is smart and good looking, and only Karen and her sister Amy know about his conniving and sadistic nature. As Karen and her sister fight to save their land, they learn that independence and loyalty, taken to extremes, can cause more damage than good. In the midst of this, Karen also realizes the importance of stories that link the past and the present with the future.

Two characters in particular serve as storytellers. Karen’s cousin Bruce Whitaker, the local historian, regales Hali with stories about their family and the region. Through Tom Gibbons, a local land conservator, the reader hears modern stories: the ones that pit farmers against developers and transplants against locals. Tom also serves as Karen’s romantic interest, a plot device which seems somewhat forced. Karen is recently widowed and considering how much she loved Joel, it seems unlikely that she would be actively seeking a serious romantic relationship so soon. Still, Tom’s character is well drawn, and his harried schedule is the basis for some of the book’s more humorous scenes.

Senehi weaves real people, places, and historical events into her narrative. She has a gift for creating a sense of place similar to what Margaret Maron achieves in *Bootlegger’s Daughter* and her other Deborah Knott mysteries. Karen shares some character traits with Maron’s titular character, as well: they are both smart and driven, but their curiosity and stubbornness sometimes gets them into trouble.

The book is a suspenseful page turner, but it’s not a mystery. The reader is handed jigsaw puzzle pieces one or two at a time, and the backstory is released at an even pace that allows the picture to come together in a satisfying conclusion.

*Render Unto the Valley* describes the kind of family drama which anyone could imagine but no one wants to experience. This novel, Senehi’s sixth (and her third set in the Blue Ridge Mountains), is recommended for public libraries (especially those with an emphasis on North Carolina or southern fiction), academic libraries which carry collections of contemporary fiction,
readers who enjoy novels with a factual basis and a strong sense of place, and almost anyone who believes that you *can* go home again.

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