
Twenty-two year old Jacy Lane—daughter of a compassionate father and a desperate mother—is on the brink of engagement to the lecherous Garrison Yob. Jacy’s rejection of Garrison and her growing attraction to Rafe, a slave entrusted with the care and training of the horses of Great Meadow farm, leads to a soul-searing revelation from her mother Claudia that sets Jacy on a flight north with her newly-discovered relatives and Rafe.

Great Meadow, the Lane’s horse farm, is located near Elizabeth City. Set in 1839, Schwab’s novel vividly depicts life on a farm which employs slave labor on a very different scale than the plantations of the Deep South, but it is the nearby Dismal Swamp that steals the show. The swamp straddles the North Carolina-Virginia line and symbolizes Jacy’s crossing over from one life into another. The swamp oppresses but also protects and nurtures, and the obstacles that Jacy overcomes there strengthen her convictions and her self-identity. Philadelphia, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania as seen through her eyes provide the reader with an illuminating view of the prejudices and difficulties experienced by free people of color even in non-slave states.

The characters who help and hinder Jacy on her journey are well-realized, especially the women. Their histories and motivations are evident, and they wrestle with a complex range of emotions. Rafe and Garrison, however, are painted with less colorful strokes. Rafe is tender, resourceful, and attractive, but his character lacks depth. In a few instances the author attempts to soften and explain Garrison’s personality with some explanatory dialog, but he remains completely unlikable.

The voices of the characters in the novel ring true in intent but the dialogue often causes the otherwise fast-paced narrative to stumble. Slave dialects are employed unevenly, and the English used by Jacy and the anti-slavery sympathizers is often florid and stilted. When Jacy adopts a foal whose dam died giving birth she declares, “Her gut-wrenching loss has not broken her will to survive.” Later in the story one of the sympathizers urges his charges to move quickly, saying, “We must go now, before the golden glow of sunrise steals our cover.”

Despite moments of weak dialog, the plot itself is strong and engaging. The negative characters, for the most part, receive a restrained amount of comeuppance which is nonetheless satisfying. The greater and lasting punishment is self-inflicted—caused by their own actions and prejudices. In contrast, Jacy takes charge of her own destiny and, by the end of her journey, is completely transformed.

*Shadow of a Quarter Moon*, Schwab’s second novel, is recommended for public libraries, academic libraries which carry collections of contemporary fiction, motivated young adult readers, and any reader who would like to share a compelling journey along the Underground Railroad.

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