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**The Past Is Never**

By Tiffany Quay Tyson  
Skyhorse Publishing  
284 pp.

Mississippi-born author Tiffany Quay Tyson, with her new novel *The Past Is Never*, has created a fine entry into a rich literary tradition of Southern Gothic work. In it, she explores how the past affects the present and what it means to be family, and how these two things mix together to often cause chaos and uncertainty. Yet, despite these heavy themes, Tyson is able to weave a beautiful, inspiring tale of never giving up where something fresh is created out of destructive events.

Tyson's narrative concentrates on a girl who goes by the name of Bert and her two siblings: her older brother Willet and younger sister Pansy. The setting is a small Mississippi Delta town called White Forest in the late 1970s, where the traumas of the Civil Rights movement in the South still loom as a specter over the people who live there. Early in the novel, Pansy disappears without a trace while the three siblings swim at a local quarry. The quarry itself serves as a character of sorts, as locals see it as a forbidden place cursed by past horrors that have occurred there. Through wonderfully timed flashbacks, we witness these events, ranging from the torture of the slaves forced to dig the quarry to incidences of horrific violence. Here, Tyson brings in elements of the supernatural, as some of the characters believe that Pansy is the latest victim of an unexplainable evil lurking in the dark waters of the quarry.

The brunt of the novel's action centers around Bert and Willet's efforts to find Pansy and keep their family from completely falling apart. In conjunction with the disappearance of their sister, their father Earl leaves and doesn't come back, creating suspicion concerning his potential role as a kidnapper. Their mother sinks deep into a depression and provides little assistance to either the search or the day-to-day survival of the remaining family members.

The only consistent figure in their lives is their grandmother Clementine, or Granny Clem, who serves as a handmaiden and country healer of sorts for the community. She brings Bert in as her assistant to provide some semblance of stability, as Willet eventually travels from place to place as a construction worker in order to support their fading mother. Thus, the lack of reliable adults is a constant theme throughout the novel. Faced with neglect and disappointment, Bert and Willet must rely on themselves to hunt for the truth of what happened to Pansy and, ultimately, discover the family's past. News of their father's supposed death eventually takes them to the Florida Everglades, which leads to the climax of the story and finds them uncovering secrets that they never imagined.

It would be a shame to reveal much more of the action of *The Past Is Never* here in this review. The revelations and twists in the second part of the novel provide insight into why certain characters act the way they do and make puzzling decisions in the opening chapters. The title, drawn from an infamous William Faulkner line, plays a major role in exploring some of the larger themes present in the novel itself. The absence of the second 'past' from that quote brings into question what the past actually is and what it truly means to those living in the present. Perhaps it means that the events of years gone by

continue to weigh down these characters and lock them into a predetermined path that is difficult to overcome. Another interpretation, however, is that the past is actually 'never' and exists as a sort of illusion that changes definitions and should be discarded if it becomes too much of a burden.

Bert, Willet, and the other characters grapple with these ideas as they try to redefine what the word 'family' actually means. Is it something controlled simply by blood, so to speak, or is it something based on feelings that develop between people who truly care about one another? My one major complaint about this novel is that it lags in certain places, but in a way this works to convey the frustrations felt by Bert and Willet as they grow up with the mystery of Pansy unsolved and constantly hanging over their heads. The true beauty in this novel, however, lies not in their discoveries of the past, but in their strength to continue fighting and create an identity for themselves in the present.

**[*The Past Is Never* by Tiffany Quay Tyson is currently available for checkout at Starkville Public Library.]**