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Promise

Minrose Gwin
William Morrow Publishing
400 pp.

In her newest novel, *Promise*, Mississippi-raised author Minrose Gwin brings to life a somewhat forgotten historical event in the 1936 tornado that demolished huge parts of her hometown of Tupelo. Through a rich cast of characters, she uses this apocalyptic backdrop to examine deeper issues such as family turmoil, racial discrimination, and memories of past trauma. Both harrowing and warm, Gwin's book shows how humanity can be at both its best and worst in any situation, especially when disaster strikes.

Gwin's novel is centered around a real event that occurred on April 5, 1936, in Tupelo, MS. A massive F5 tornado swept through the town, leaving a path of destruction and death that was shocking to a citizenry already reeling from the effects of the Great Depression. Gwin does a masterful job of creating a sense of melancholy and dread with her setting, both before and after the tornado strikes. She describes in great detail the mayhem caused by such a devastating natural disaster. Structures lay in ruins, trees are pulled up by their very roots, and countless people are either missing or killed. Many of these scenes are not for the faint of heart: the dead literally hang from the trees while family members mourn beneath, waiting for anyone to come along and help get them down. Thus, a sense of fear and confusion permeates throughout the novel, as characters try to overcome these feelings to simply survive into the next day.

Through this demolished landscape, the reader follows two main characters and, eventually, two families linked through a traumatic event in their pasts. First, we meet Dovey Grand'homme, an older African-American woman that works as a laundress in town, mostly for white families. One of these families is the McNabbs, whose teenage daughter Jo serves as the other primary character in *Promise*. Her father Mort works as a judge and her mother Alice is a schoolteacher, and are considered important members of Tupelo society. The event that links these characters is one of tragedy and pain. The eldest McNabb child, a boy named Son, raped Dovey's granddaughter, Dreama, which led to a pregnancy and the eventual birth of her great grandson Promise.

In the aftermath of the tornado, both of these families are scattered. Dovey is flung from her house and wakes up in a pond, a terrible foot injury hampering her; this leaves her disoriented, as she is unsure where either her husband Virgil or her grandchildren ended up after the devastation. Jo suffers a horrific head injury and must deal with the death of her brother Son and the crippling of her mother, along with the fact that her younger brother Tommy, just a toddler, was sucked from the house and is missing. Thus, both Dovey and Jo must embark on a painful and at times terrifying journey in order to stay alive and reunite their remaining loved ones.

The most striking aspect of Gwin's novel is that it displays both the fragility and strength of what humans have created in this world. In the blink of an eye, the tornado demolishes homes and

businesses, leaving people wandering aimlessly in search of any stability they can find. The disaster also tests the bonds that people have formed in relationships with each other. Jo eventually finds a baby who she believes is Tommy, but is almost immediately abandoned by the other members of her family in one form or another. Her father consistently disappears for mysterious reasons and her mother sinks deeper within herself after losing her leg.

Dovey, along with searching for Virgil, Dreama, and Promise, must constantly overcome the rank racial discrimination that is entrenched in the small Mississippi town. However, there are instances where this harsh social system begins to fray a bit as well: Dovey, as she struggles to simply make it through the days, no longer feels obligated to kowtow to others simply because they are white. We also see outsiders from around the country, members of the Depression era work programs, helping everyone, no matter the color of their skin. In the end, this serves as a microcosm of the beauty and power of this novel. Amidst the devastation brought about by nature, we witness human beings displaying strength they never believed they had, which leads to small moments of tenderness that bring new life to a seemingly ruined landscape.

[*Promise* by Minrose Gwin is currently available for checkout from Starkville Public Library.]