

Book of the Week

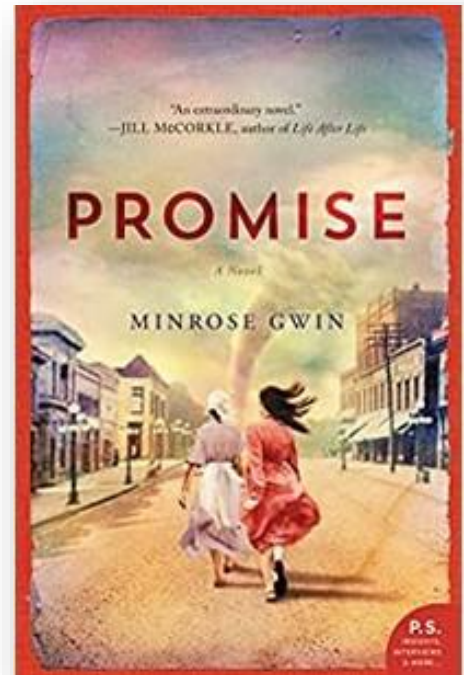
***Promise* by Minrose Gwin**

Book Review by Peggy Bates

It seems as if a week doesn't go by without the threat of bad weather now a days. There are repetitive weather patterns with TORCONS approaching the maximum levels and warnings to hunker down in an interior room on the lowest floor in your home until the disaster of the day has passed. *Promise* by Minrose Gwin is an historical fiction account of the great F-5 tornado that swept across North Mississippi 85 years ago. On the evening of Palm Sunday in 1936, the city of Tupelo was struck by the deadliest twister ever in US history.

Promise is the story of two families and how their contrasting lives are connected before and by this event. The story is told in two separate points of view by two women: Jo McNabb, a white girl of 16 from a prominent Tupelo family, and Dovey Grand'homme, their African-American laundress who is great grandmother to baby Promise. Promise, the outcome of a violent encounter of Dreama, Dovey's granddaughter, with Son McNabb, the treasured, bullying, mean and amoral brother of Jo, is a hinge between the families.

As the tornado approaches with no warning, Dovey is trying to corral the McNabb laundry to bring it inside from the sudden bad weather and is swept up and away, flying in the winds, and dropped some distance away into Gum Pond with other bodies, livestock and debris. Jo, whose arm is in a cast, is surprised by her father rushing home and shouting to her to move her mother and baby brother Tommy from the upstairs bedroom and into the basement before disappearing back into the dark. Before she can react, the wind sweeps her from the back porch through the house to the front door as Son comes running in. When the tornado has passed, Jo wakes up with a head wound, a hysterical mother with a disastrous broken leg and a baby brother who has been sucked through the window and away into the night.



Tupelo, its families, its homes and neighborhoods, its landscape has been torn asunder. There are stories of flying livestock, a huge fireball, and bodies found in trees. In the week that follows, Jo must try to care for and reassure her distraught mother. Her father is AWOL and her little brother is missing. Dovey must find her way back home to look for her husband, granddaughter and little Promise. The community must try to rise from the rubble. Interwoven as the backdrop for the stories of Jo and Dovey was the remarkable Depression Era coalitions of local, regional and national agencies like the Red Cross, American Legion, the CCC, the WPA and the Frisco Railway. The shame of the time is that, although all these coalitions were great, there remained the inequities between the races in their relief efforts. For instance, this single Tupelo tornado was possibly the strongest F-5 tornado and the deadliest at a record 233 lives lost, but those did not include African-American lives lost. No record was kept of them.

Minrose Gwin tells a good story. Her writing is both lyrical and familiar to my Mississippi ears. And probably anyone who grew up in North Mississippi has heard about this particular tornado through first or second accounts from "old-timers." So although the plot focuses on the growth and development of the main characters and their searches for the baby boys, the setting also provides an excellent and forbidding and fascinating stage. I hope you will enjoy reading *Promise* by Minrose Gwin who will be the guest for the Starkville Public Library's Books and Authors at noon on April 8. I hope to see you there, too.

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