

Book of the Week

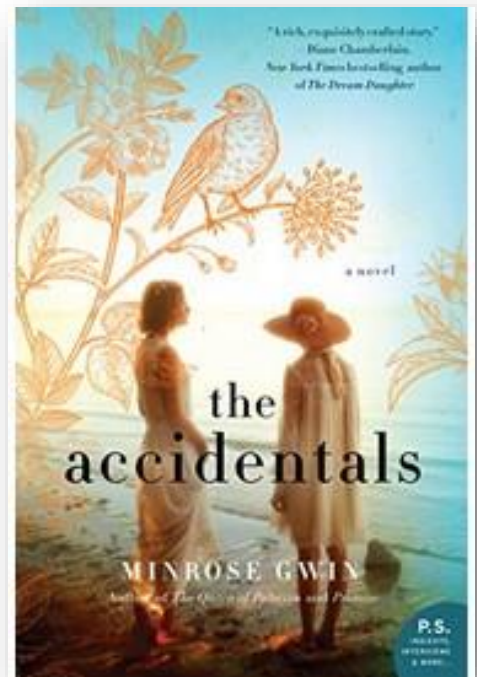
***The Accidentals* by Minrose Gwin**

Book Review by Sue Minchew

If you can remember drive-in movies, Nehi grape sodas, Nabs, Peter Pan collars, baby doll pajamas, the Cold War, bomb shelters, Sputnik, and the Viet Nam war, then *The Accidentals* by Minrose Gwin will resonate with you as it did with me. Most of the novel takes places during the 1950's and early 60's, a period sometimes referred to as a simpler, more innocent time. But was it? For women, not so much, for it was the time period before Roe vs. Wade, before the pill, before sex education. In fact, the word "sex" was rarely uttered, and a woman wasn't "pregnant"; she was "expecting" or "pg." Unmarried girls who became pregnant were labeled "bad girls," and their options were limited. Abortions were illegal and extremely risky when performed by hackers in nonsterile conditions. Oftentimes unwed pregnant girls were sent away to live with a "sick" relative (probably a home for unwed mothers) until the arrival of the baby, which was then put up for adoption. If the girl was old enough and the father was willing, they may have entered into a hasty marriage. Each of these scenarios is played out through the events surrounding the McAlister family, who live in the rural southwest Mississippi town of Opelika, about an hour from New Orleans.

Using eight different narrators throughout the novel, Gwin opens with the mother, Olivia, who is married to Holly and has two teenage daughters, Grace (16), and June (14). She is a birder who has hopes of one day going to Paris and of returning to work. After discovering that she is pregnant, she secretly goes to a backwoods "doctor" to have the problem taken care of. One Sunday afternoon, while Holly and the girls are visiting the New Orleans Zoo, Olivia bleeds to death from the botched abortion.

The entire family is devastated by Olivia's death. Holly falls into a deep depression and turns to alcohol for relief. Grace cannot come to terms with what her mother "went and did." Living in a fantasy world, she develops a crush on the teenage boy, Daniel, who lives across the street. Grace observes him from



afar, noticing that he sits on his screened-in front porch every Sunday afternoon while his family is out for a drive. Despite the fact that he is wearing his sister's clothes on these occasions, Grace decides to pursue Daniel by going over and talking with him. They become good friends and are considered a couple. When George, a handsome Italian, moves to town, Daniel begins a friendship with him. Determined not to be excluded, Grace, wearing her baby doll pajamas, goes over to Daniel's house one night and climbs in his bedroom window. Undeterred when she discovers George in bed with Daniel, she joins them. They become an inseparable threesome, a *Menage a trois*. Grace subsequently becomes pregnant but does not know which boy is the father. Although she tries to keep her condition a secret, June notices the absence of Grace's "monthlies" and her growing belly bump. Although June agrees to keep the pregnancy a secret, she ultimately reveals it to her father. As a result, Grace is sent away to live with Olivia's sister Frances in New Orleans, and the two boys are shipped off to boarding schools.

The original plan was for Frances, a single schoolteacher, to keep Grace's baby. However, when the baby is born with a badly disfigured mouth, Frances changes her mind, and the baby is left at the Cloister in New Orleans to be adopted. Grace leaves the hospital and boards a bus headed for Chicago. Meanwhile, at the Cloister a black nurse named Ed Mae is put in charge of taking care of the baby ("Baby Girl" she calls her). While bathing Baby Girl, Ed Mae gets distracted when some white nurses tell her to do some of the less pleasant chores. During those few distracted minutes, Baby Girl slips under water in her tub and, when found, is nonresponsive. An ambulance is called to take the baby to the morgue. On his route, the ambulance driver, Fred, holds the baby and thinks about his wife who is very depressed after a recent miscarriage. Miraculously, the baby begins to stir in Fred's arms. He decides to take the revived baby home so that he and his wife can raise the child as their own. They move away to Kentucky to start a new life with Baby Girl. Ed Mae is arrested and sent to prison for her negligence that led to the baby's "death."

The McAlister family experiences yet another unplanned pregnancy when June, a college student now, becomes pregnant after a drunken night out with her boy friend of only a few months. They marry in haste and move to New Orleans. The unhappy union ends up in divorce.

Gwin continues the narrative until June and Grace are quite old, revealing what happened to them later, as well as the "after" stories of Fred, Holly, Frances, Ed Mae, and Baby Girl.

Stylistically, the novel is a delight to read. The prose has a lyrical quality with the frequent use of metaphor and other poetic devices. The title itself is an interesting metaphor for what happens to the characters. When she spoke at one of the Friends of the Library Books and Authors events, Gwin explained that "accidentals" is a term for migratory birds blown off course as Olivia, the birder, mentions early in the novel. Each of the characters is an accidental in the sense that his or her life gets changed or accidentally blown off course by unforeseen circumstances. I enjoyed Gwin's use of shifting points of view with eight different narrators as the technique effectively conveys the characters' innermost thoughts and motives.

The Accidentals by Tupelo native Minrose Gwin is an important novel that attacks difficult issues related to women, the choices they have regarding reproduction, and societal expectations and judgments of women. Gwin never moralizes or insinuates her own opinion on such issues; rather she lets the story speak for itself. And it speaks volumes. It is a thought-provoking novel that has continued to haunt me long after I read the last page. It is not surprising that Gwin was named the recipient of the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters 2020 Fiction Award for *The Accidentals*.