



'The Salt Fields' is a novella written by Stacy D. Flood about life in the Jim Crow era South.

'Sometimes survival is relative'

Novella tells of fleeing ghosts and chasing dreams

Stacy D. Flood grew up in Buffalo, New York, but as a young man came to the West Coast to work on his Master of Fine Arts in creative writing in the Bay Area. After traveling the world over since then, he's settled in Seattle, at least for now, where his career as a playwright has taken off.

This week's book

'The Salt Fields' by Stacy D. Flood
Lanternfish — 130 pp — \$14; kindle \$7.99

But earlier this year, Flood also had a novella published. "The Salt Fields" may be a slim volume, but it packs a punch.

You'll read, in the first few pages of this first-person narrative, that "sometimes survival is relative." And as you get pulled deeper into the story of Minister Peters you'll learn that in his experience there's a corollary — that oftentimes relatives don't survive.

Minister, that's his first name, is a Black man who was born in the Jim Crow South. He comes from a family of loss. He is the son of an orphan. He is the husband of a woman who was found murdered soon after she ran away with another man. And a year and a half after that, Minister's only child falls into a well and drowns.

"People disappear in the South, one way or another," Minister says. Especially Black folks.

Unmoored, he decides to leave the South and its ghosts behind. He gives his house to the neighbor girl, an unwed teenage mom whose boyfriend has disappeared, and boards

a train for the North, where he hears there are more opportunities for Black men.

Riding in the same seating compartment of the segregated passenger car are a newlywed couple, Divinion and Lanah, and Carvall, a soldier just discharged from the Army. The train ride north is going to take about 24 hours, so the four of them fall into a conversation that quickly takes on the intimacy of strangers who are never going to see one another again.

Divinion is full of big talk, to which his bride takes exception. But when he ignores her peevishness and continues to converse with Carvall, Lanah focuses her wiles upon Minister.

The train clatters north through the countryside, through fields of cotton that appear as a sea of white. When Minister observes that it looks like salt, Carvall notes that "there's salt all over Carolina, salt from tears and blood and the dead"

"The whole South ain't nothing but a scar with some salt on it."

The train makes several extended stops along the way, which gives the travelers time to get out, visit relatives, dine at a local café, gamble or get a haircut. But they are still in the South, with all of its attendant perils.

Despite the brevity of this book, Flood creates a densely detailed world of sensations and ideas. There are images and scenarios enough to keep a symbolologist busy for quite some time.

And long after reading the last page of this book, readers of all kinds will find themselves pondering Flood's nuanced intimations of generational trauma, systemic racism, regret and reinvention.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbaralmcm@gmail.com

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