

HAUNTED LIVES: WRESTLING WITH THE PAST

a review by Lisa Wenger Bro

Therese Anne Fowler. *A Good Neighborhood*. St. Martin's Press, 2020.

Charles Dodd White. *In the House of the Wilderness*. Swallow Press, 2018.

LISA WENGER BRO received her PhD in English from UNC Greensboro, with a focus on US magical realism, including writers such as North Carolina's Sarah Addison Allen. She is now a Professor of English at Middle Georgia State University, specializing in postmodern American literature, with special emphasis on magical realism and speculative fiction. She is currently working on a book project exploring biopolitics in contemporary science fiction.

Charles Dodd White's *In the House of Wilderness* is a haunting exploration of love that alienates and the fragmentation that comes when you sacrifice pieces of yourself for the one you love. The novel is also an exploration of the individuality of loss, pain, and suffering, and how they lead to further alienation and isolation. It is about the lives of haunted individuals trying to find themselves and a way out of their grief.

Therese Anne Fowler's *A Good Neighborhood* offers an equally haunting tale, a tale that at its most basic is about assumptions that eradicate any semblance of understanding, trigger anger, and consequently raise sublimated prejudices. Fowler reveals the heartbreaking account of lives shattered when both class and racial issues come to the surface, when privilege and entitlement take precedence over empathy and understanding.

In fact, there is a haunting, lyrical quality throughout **Charles Dodd White's *In the House of Wilderness*** where setting frequently echoes the characters' emotions. An early line – referring to the makeshift home that drifters Wolf, Winter, and Rain create in an abandoned village – stands in for the quiet desperation and searching the two main characters, Rain and

Stratton Bryant, experience: "They patched their homes together, made them as whole as the materials would allow" (5). Setting mirroring emotions also launches us into Stratton's own grief over the loss of his wife, Liza, at the novel's beginning. Ready to abandon the farmhouse and his former life with Liza, he walks a real estate agent through the home, stepping across "the hall with its bruised wood and talking floor" (9). Like Stratton, the floor talks but is not truly heard or understood, both creating an indecipherable language of pain. This connection as well as the individuality of suffering are further cemented when Stratton longs "to talk to someone, to have another person share this immensity with him, but [believes] there was no one, no one who could hear him as he needed to be heard" (156).

While Stratton is isolated in his own grief and suffering, even worse are the pieces that he gave away, sacrificing himself in his love for Liza, his artistically talented and alcoholic wife. Liza was a woman with vision and drive, renowned as much for her photography as her drinking, who became as much a part of her art as were her actual photos: "She had become a personality," Stratton realizes, "[a] woman to be handled so that

OPPOSITE Charles Dodd White reading from his new novel at City Lights Bookstore in Sylva, NC, 20 Oct. 2018

CHARLES DODD WHITE is an Associate Professor at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, TN, and in 2018 he was inducted into the East Tennessee Writers Hall of Fame. He received the Thomas and Lillie D. Chaffin Award for Excellence in Appalachian Literature, the Appalachian Book of the Year award in fiction, a Jean Ritchie Fellowship from Lincoln Memorial University, and an individual artist's grant from the North Carolina Arts Council. His previous books include the novel *Lambs of Men* (Casperian Books, 2010; reviewed in *NCLR* 2011) and the short story collection, *Sinners of Sanction County* (Bottom Dog Press, 2011), reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013 and including a short story first published in *NCLR* 2010.

she performed to expectations" (97). Just like the tragic images she captures with her camera lens, so becomes Liza's life and death, alcohol consuming her while her fans watch the spectacle as it unfolds.

Stratton, on the other hand, sacrifices his own career for hers and stands by as she spirals out of control. Even at the beginning of their relationship when he gives up his home and life in order to follow Liza, he realizes that "he couldn't make sense of the frail logic behind what he was doing. He had been infatuated before, but this was something different, dangerously so. He felt parts of himself disappearing when he was with Liza, and the onset of this change was more distressing because of the way it seemed to attract his notice but not his care" (92).

This pattern of sacrificing for Liza continues throughout their marriage, as when Liza is offered a three-year extension to her residency at Berea College and accepts "the offer without asking Stratton what he thought because there was nothing really worth discussing, she told him. He agreed, as he was expected to" (93). Loving Liza, in both life and death, means losing himself. What remains is a fragmented man isolated in his grief. This loss of both love and self is most apparent when sitting at Liza's desk and staring at his reflection in the window, he studies his "twinned specter . . . the version of his appearance he liked the best, this hologram compressed into two dimensions. . . . It was this second self in a middle space of canted light that suited what he had become, an image outside

of form, incapable of the many small concerns of being fully realized within its frame" (14). His view of himself as ghostly and as lacking substance is the end result of years of giving to a woman who never gave back.

This same longing for a reciprocated love has an equally devastating impact on Rain. Raised in poverty in a home where her mother was more interested in finding the next man than in her own daughter, Rain is forced to leave when her mother's latest man begins staring at her like a predator. Leaving home with nothing to her name, Rain desperately searches for love. She has no positive example, so when Wolf, a man she meets at a compound, offers her the love and family she craves, Rain latches on.

However, Rain is only an object to Wolf, and she sacrifices parts of herself in order to make him happy. Wolf, though, is a violent and manipulative man who is solely out for himself. He prostitutes both Winter and Rain, wasting the money the women earn on alcohol and drugs while also claiming he's looking out for both and proclaiming his love. Wolf is all about power and control, and, if he can't maintain those through manipulation, then violence will do. Rain is so unsure of herself that she even justifies Wolf's sexual assault shortly after she miscarries his child, even deciding that it is "[b]etter to be the object that receives the act rather than the woman who expresses permission" (53). That Wolf views the women as possessions is something Rain only realizes after she's given over her body, her sense of self, and



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her free will. When Rain finally tries to leave Wolf, he pulls out a gun, telling her, "You do what I tell you to do, girl. That's how it's always been. And it's going to be how it stays" (68).

Escaping, Rain runs back to Stratton, the one person who'd offered unconditional kindness. Yet like Stratton, she's broken and a shell. At one point, Rain writes, "WHO I AM with a vivid underline. Her pen tapped the page for a while before she began to write other words in a column. First, WOMAN, and later, HIPPIE, WAITRESS, PROSTITUTE, COLLEGE STUDENT, and finally MOTHER?" (159). Her loss of self is indicated through these broad words, all of which are stereotypes and none of which actually get to who Rain truly is. Furthermore, the men in her life frequently reinforce her fragmentation, projecting their own patriarchal beliefs about how women should be onto her. As Wolf tells Rain, his relationship with her was never about love, but rather "I wanted to shape you" (242).

Later, Loyal, a local man Rain dates, grows angry because she

won't move in with him; Rain is not fulfilling his expectations or his desires. Listening to Loyal's tirade, "It was beyond her how she couldn't simply find the words, the specific conveyance of what she needed to find herself, to become who she was in a way that had never been allowed to happen. . . . He wanted her to become part of his world, to cede herself to his idea of what would make him happy" (204). This understanding is similar to Stratton's own when he decides to give away Liza's photos and sell their home: "it was what was needed if he was to find out what it meant to live on his own. Some men could live as ghosts or votaries, hang their fortunes around the throats of the dead, call up the pieties of grief. But Stratton had come close enough to that kind of sacrifice while Liza was still alive" (41). Both recognize the pieces of themselves that they've lost, the love that was turned against them, and how alone in their suffering they have been. Thus, an unlikely friendship grows between the two alienated people as they discover who they are and learn what love should be.

At the center of **Therese Anne Fowler's *A Good Neighborhood*** is an older, well-established neighborhood undergoing gentrification, a beloved oak tree, and two families of different backgrounds and races. So begins the collapse, as the



narrator relates, of the "loose balance between *old* and *new*, *us* and *them*" (3). The tragedy that unfolds in the novel is interwoven with the voice of a narrator who is an unspecified member of the neighborhood. Speaking for the neighborhood "we," the narrator relates the present events, clues to the past tale as it unfolds. This is a voice distant from the story's action, wiser for the knowledge the "we" now holds, and haunted, much like Hamlet, by its own inactivity. In this fashion, the narrator sets up the unfolding drama, relating, "An upscale new house in a simple old neighborhood. A girl on a chaise beside a swimming pool. . . . We begin our story here" (3). The narrator's chorus-like voice shifts, taking on a haunted tone a few sentences later with references to a funeral, to the media's questions about whose side they're on, and to their own complicity for "we never wanted to take sides" (4). So they didn't, and so they didn't intervene.

Valerie and Xavier Alston-Holt, a widowed mother and her teenage son, are part of the old Oak Knoll neighborhood.

It's a peaceful neighborhood, a neighborhood that the narrator terms "progressive" because of the people's acceptance of the mixed race Alston-Holts (Valerie black and her husband, Tom, white) despite "not doing much to demonstrate that character" (14). This is a neighborhood that, while older, is still a wonderful and affordable place to call home and raise a family. Brad Whitman's family, which includes his wife Julia, teenage stepdaughter Juniper, and biological daughter Lily, are the new money, members of an upwardly mobile class who can't afford the city's expensive and prestigious Hillside neighborhood. Oak Knoll, with its older homes, begs for gentrification; the properties can be bought cheaply, razed, and then McMansionized.

This clash of classes stirs up tensions in the neighborhood, particularly for Valerie and her beloved oak tree. Even before the Whitmans' move in next door to Valerie and Xavier, Valerie is angry, "not sure how to be friendly with the kind of people who would put up the money to tear down the old house and cut down the trees. *All of the trees*," and further commenting that "[p]eople like that have no conscience. It's like they're raping the landscape" (6–7). For Valerie, a PhD whose specialties are forestry and ecology, the oak in her yard has special significance; it was the first thing she and Tom fell in love with when looking at

the property. Consequently, it represents all that she has loved and has lost or will lose: her husband, who died far too young, Xavier's childhood playing under the tree, and the memories that will remain even after Xavier graduates and moves across the country for college. It also has historical significance for Valerie as the site where slaves once gathered. Valerie, therefore, is horrified when the oak begins to die, something she feared would happen when the Whitmans' developer put in a pool. Even before the tree's deterioration, though, Valerie is not inclined to view the Whitmans favorably, even admitting to Xavier, "I can't think of a time when I've been so predisposed to *despise* something or someone this way" (26). Upon first seeing Brad, she pegs him as a "man-child with money" (16). As for his wife, Valerie is "not crazy about the prospect of seeing young, beautiful Julia Whitman lying around the pool all summer in a bikini probably showing off her five-day-a-week-workout-fit body" (23).

With barely a few sentences spoken, Valerie dismisses Brad as an immature idiot flaunting his wealth and Julia as a vapid trophy wife who only cares about her appearance and money.

Brad's assumptions, on the other hand, are tied to race and stereotypes. When he first encounters Xavier, Xavier is doing yard work for his mother. Brad immediately assumes, because of his skin color, that

Xavier is hired help. In fact, we quickly learn of Brad's appalling views of race and of gender, views that both Julia and the narrator justify. After all, Brad is the hero who "rescued" Julia, a single mother, from a life of poverty. The narrator, speaking again for the neighborhood "we," notes how charming, "warm" and "affable" Brad is, and how "[w]e felt privileged . . . that he'd chosen to make our neighborhood his new home" (27). A wealthy white man couldn't possibly put on a façade, and any minor "flaws" witnessed must be an aberration. The neighborhood "we" even dismiss and justify the fact that Brad, who owns a successful HVAC business, only employs technicians who are "clean-cut, polite, honest men, every one of them white because we surmised, Brad understood a truth about his fellow Southern citizens: a great many of them would not open their door to a man of color – especially a black man" (55). While it's the narrator "surmising" and justifying, Brad's racial prejudice is glaring: black men are lesser than their white counterparts. Juniper reinforces Brad's discrimination when questioning what, in her parents' minds, makes a good neighborhood and determines that "*good* seemed to mean there were mainly other people like themselves. So: white, privileged, very concerned with appearances . . . or perceptions" (50). Both Valerie and Brad are so rigid in

their views that neither attempts to understand the other, and both dismiss each other as lesser.

Brad's racist and sexist views dehumanize others and separate him from anyone different from himself. If white is good, in Brad's mind, then white male is even better. He treats Julia almost like a pet. As he reveals, they no longer have a sexual relationship, but he can't help but gloat about being her "savior," telling friends "she's the rescue wife. Things were pretty rough for her before we got together" (54). Julia no longer works, no longer has a focus outside her children and Brad. For Brad, women are objects he controls, and he and Julia pass this view of submissive women to Juniper. Julia monitors her daughter's weight, her appearance, and even her sexuality, making Juniper attend a church that believes a woman's place is in the home and that girls must take purity pledges, abstaining from sex until marriage. Juniper wants to go to college, yet Brad refuses to listen to her, telling her college is worthless because "[i]f you're lucky, you'll



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have a great life with a man who loves and takes care of you so you don't need to work at all" (58). When she wants a job, he manipulates her into working for him, not because he believes she should have a career, but because "[t]hen she wouldn't go off to college at all. Then she would be right there where he could see her every day" (59).

Brad feels entitled; he should be able to get everything he wants, should be able to control everything in his life. He's upset because he has to "settle" for Oak Knoll instead of Hillside. He begins lusting after his stepdaughter and justifying that lust. Furthermore, he believes he should get whatever he wants, and "it galled him to know that something he wanted was not in fact gettable. There had been very little in his life so far that wasn't" (128). He is proud of his "connections" to other powerful white men and in buying material items. Money and possessions make Brad feel worthwhile, and he delights in the fact that he now "had no trouble whatsoever walking into a bank with a request for money and walking out with a Maserati, walking out with a small mansion, walking out with a beach house. Maybe now he'd . . . get himself a boat – a yacht" (152). Brad sees himself as powerful, as superior, and he believes he deserves that power.

Rigid views, entitlement, prejudice, and obliviousness: all the dominoes are in place, and then comes the breeze. Valerie files a lawsuit against both Brad

and his developer, suing for half a million dollars in damages for the loss of her oak tree and assuming nothing will change. After all, Brad is a wealthy, white man, so what's a "little" bit of money. Both Xavier and Chris, Valerie's boyfriend, tell her the lawsuit is a bad idea, but she refuses to listen, dismissing the idea that Brad would become her enemy. When Xavier asks her about Julia, with whom Valerie is becoming friends, she replies, "I have all the friends I need" (109). Not once does she think about who else she might impact, nor does she have empathy for Julia, a woman desperately seeking female friendship. Julia nearly cripples herself with insecurity when she brings foie gras to the neighborhood book club and fears, "she was going to seem pretentious. Foie gras? Jesus. She'd been too eager for these women's approval and now they were going to think she was an ass" (41). Julia, who opens her heart and talks with Valerie about her sexual assault, is so insecure about her poor background that she fixates on appearances. Making assumptions about just who Julia is based solely on appearance and class, Valerie callously dismisses the woman who had grown to view Valerie as a friend. Never mind the growing relationship between Xavier and Juniper.

And then the dominoes fall as Brad's anger leads to lies, racism, false arrest, injustice, and the funeral the narrator references at the very beginning.

Valerie and Xavier, given Xavier's love for Juniper, are stripping away everything that belongs to Brad. Juniper, like his money, is Brad's possession, and "[t]hat boy took something that should have been his, and the boy's mother was trying to rob him, too, and for that they were going to pay" (210). Caught in the middle are Juniper and Xavier, two teens who see the differences between themselves and dismiss them as unimportant, two teens who see the beauty in each other because of those differences. Left in the wake are families who have to piece themselves back together and a neighborhood haunted by its own lack of action.

Both Charles Dodd White's *In the House of Wilderness* and Therese Anne Fowler's *A Good Neighborhood* explore the ways in which individuals shatter and the choices and events that lead to that end. Whereas White's novel illustrates a pathway for finding oneself again and for healing, Fowler's explores the tragic outcome when individuals fail to treat all as equals and fail to empathize with and understand those who are different. Both also explore the devastating ideas and ideologies related to gender, class, and/or race that lead to shattered lives and how those entrenched ideas lead to anger, violence, and dehumanization. In this respect, both novels deal with hauntings, the haunting of individuals faced with a past full of pain as well as with the struggle of figuring out how to move forward. ■