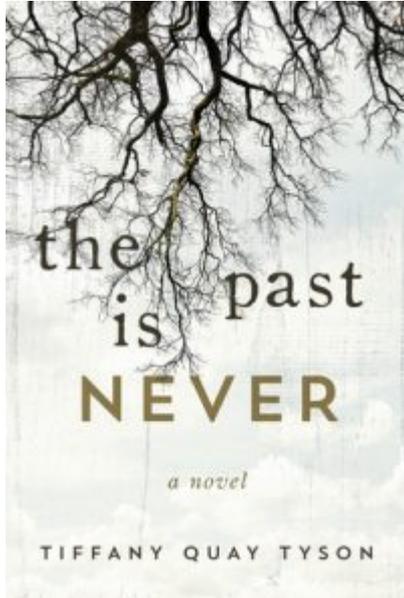


Tiffany Quay Tyson's Novel The Past Is Never Reveals in the Line between Personal and Geographical Histories

written by Guest Contributor | December 7, 2018



The Past is Never by Tiffany Quay Tyson
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Tiffany Quay Tyson's sophomore novel, *The Past is Never*, set in the Mississippi Delta and the Florida Everglades, explores the past's ability to haunt the present and determine the future. The protagonist, a young woman named Bert, cannot overcome the despair and guilt she lives with since the day of her little sister, Pansy's disappearance. The first half of the novel follows young Bert and her brother, Willet, who are both caught, unknowingly, in the web of secrets strung from their parents' pasts. Central to this story is a "forbidden and abandoned rock quarry", "a hole in the ground, a depression in the earth, a gaping wound, an open mouth"; the quarry is not only the site of Pansy's disappearance but also a metaphorical pit that tunnels to the core of the American South's history.

The creature watched and waited. This is the first line of the novel, and Bert's initial interpretation of Pansy's disappearance. Another character, Willet's friend, Bubba, who was seen at the site of the disappearance, swears that it was aliens that stole Pansy. The local police, however, point fingers toward Bert and Willet's father, a known counterfeiter. Tyson raises many questions about what may have actually happened to Pansy, all the while keeping plausible the possibilities of monsters or aliens or the Devil.

Each chapter is split into two portions: the first portion is told from

Bert's point of view and the second portion tells the story of the quarry's inception, the reason the locals consider it haunted, and the tragedies of Bert's heritage. This method of storytelling binds the past and the present together, a thematic structure that coils the tension as Bert and Willet grow up and embark on a journey to untangle the knotted mystery of Pansy and their father's disappearances. As the narrative progresses, Tyson unspools more information about Bert's father and her grandmother, Clem, who notoriously assists women with wanted and unwanted pregnancies. It is too late for Bert to turn back when she learns that her fate and that of her family is more tightly wound to the history of the quarry than she had ever imagined.

When Bert and Willet receive news of a sighting of their father in Florida, they speculate that he may have had something to do with Pansy's disappearance. Together, they leave the Delta behind and attempt to take hold of their misfortune by moving to the Everglades and investigating what happened to their father. The more Bert and Willet ask around, the more the locals try to keep outsiders away from their business. When all hope seems lost, Willet decides to move on with his life, but Bert cannot forget about Pansy or her father. She takes matters into her own hands, despite her grandmother's warnings, and risks her own life in order to finally bring light to the darkness that befell her family.

Tyson's use of two-pronged structure and close narrative distance to Bert are pivotal to the siblings' story in that theirs is inseparable from the American South's. Without the quarry where Pansy was last seen, Bert and Willet's lives would have never been disjointed; they would have never left White Forest to witness the dawn of their family's next generation; Bert would have continued working with Clem, and would have never learned the truth about her blood relations. Tyson heightens suspense when writing from Bert's point of view by making the most out of what Bert does and does not know. For it is Bert's youthful naiveté, upon which her beliefs are founded, that allows Tyson to infuse magical realism and distort reality until the inevitable truth surfaces. This motif is paralleled when she writes about the past that led up to Bert's circumstances (as Bert and Clem later concur,

“...[m]emory [is] like a series of interconnected caves, each one containing something new and surprising”).

In the case of the American South, Tyson plays with the perceptions surrounding the country's interconnected caves of memory. If the past is better left forgotten, which events would historians revise or omit? Tyson is well aware of some of America's missteps, and she ties them to the fate of her protagonist.

As a new Floridian and a new southerner, I valued Tyson's illuminating and boldly honest portrayal of the novel's setting. I began reading this novel

while living in California, and continued reading as I drove across the country, through much of the geography Tyson depicts. While preparing to move to this new region and the Sunshine State, I indulged in as much literature from the American South as I could—works by Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, among many others—and found Tyson’s voice to be a necessary revival for the contemporary literary canon. While I have only begun my descent into the South’s history—literary and beyond—Tyson’s novel is a profound entry point toward the region’s many interconnected caves and deep mysteries.

The Past is Never is about the loss of innocence—of both Bert’s and the American South’s. Tyson weaves the story of Pansy’s disappearance with slaves chained and forced to dig holes in the earth and German prisoners working Mississippi cotton fields. From dark woods full of water oaks in the Delta to the mangroves and sandbars of the Everglades, this novel employs grit in the tradition of Southern Gothic literature while blending elements of magical realism and mystery into Bert’s coming-of-age story. With a nod to Faulkner’s *Requiem for A Nun* in her novel’s epigraph (“The past is never dead. It’s not even the past.”), Tyson reminds us from whom we were born—“cotton slaves and plantation owners...preachers and kitchen help...healers and murderers...liars and truth-tellers...criminals and lawmakers...bigots and the oppressed...monsters a saints”—a past from which we can never escape.



Nathan Elias is the author of the novelette *A Myriad of Roads That Lead to Here* and the chapbook *Glass City Blues: Poems*. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles and has served as Fiction, Art, and Flash Fiction editor on the literary journal *Lunch Ticket*. His writing has appeared in literary publications such as *PANK*, *Hobart*, *Barnstorm*, and many others. He has taught a variety of creative writing classes, including fiction, poetry, and screenwriting. He is currently working on a novel.