



John Lane, *Fate Moreland's Widow*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2015. 184 pp. Hardcover \$24.95. Epub \$18.99.

Near the end of the first act of John Lane's *Fate Moreland's Widow*, Ben Crocker gets his initial view of the eponymous widow, Novie Moreland. It is Labor Day weekend, 1935, and Crocker is watching a lake in the Blue Ridge Mountains as it is dragged. Three men are missing and among them are Mrs. Moreland's husband and son. While the bodies are pulled from the lake, Ben Crocker notes how young and pretty the newly widowed woman is. "My gaze was a little too long and obvious," Crocker tells us. "Her beauty was an open secret." Here we come to the end of the first third of the book, and the reader's gaze is diverted from the action playing out on the lake and instead

directed toward the human relationships this action pushes to the forefront.

Ben Crocker is both witness and agent in Lane's novel about the unionization of a Southern textile mill and the fight against this unionization by the mill boss, George McCane. As a man caught between workers and bosses in the fight, Crocker knows better than most the human toll of such struggles. His family has ties to the mountain people who are working to organize their labor, but Crocker lives in town. He took an accounting course and now does the books for McCane, but his job quickly becomes more than just paperwork. He finds himself tasked with morally ambiguous responsibilities, and his actions in the wake of the drownings, the murder indictment, and in the union conflict are to haunt him for the rest of his life.

We see evidence of this lifelong resonance in the structure of the book: an encounter in 1988 sparks the re-telling of events from 1935. Because of this backward-looking position, the reader feels the weight of every action. The title reveals what happens to Fate Moreland; the 1988 prologue reveals information about the trial and hints at George's brother Angus's involvement. The story's forward motion instead comes from the humanity at the center of the larger dramatic action. Here, Lane has done a marvelous job drawing complicated, nuanced characters where neither side seems overtly good or evil.

Too, this backward-looking stance allows both Lane and Crocker to meditate on the ripples cast forward through time by an incident on a sleepy lake in 1935. Lane's language regarding the past's relationship to the future is especially beautiful. Thinking of an encounter with George McCane's wife, Crocker observes: "I wish I would have had the forethought to tell Edna McCane that the past isn't a ledger. Even for an accountant, there are no neat profit and loss columns in a life lived day-to-day with no understanding of what the future might bring or not bring." Edna McCane sparks in Crocker a personal calculation, a reckoning based on both his memories of the past and on his knowledge of what will transpire over the half century after Fate Moreland's death.

And if we begin with a widow, we end with one as well. With so much going on in this tale – union struggles, murder charges, a strained marriage, a riveting trial, a questioning of identity

and self – it is interesting that Crocker focuses on Novie Moreland. Though we don't see her right away, Crocker's understanding of her story reveals much about the physical and emotional tolls of labor struggles, about grief, and about the secrets we keep and why we might keep them. In *Fate Moreland's Widow*, Lane explores territory that feels completely new and under-represented in fiction, and he keeps the focus of this exploration just left of center, so the reader never forgets that larger dramas usually have very real, very personal effects.

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