

A Passel of: Monic Ductan's *Daughters of Muscadine*

Monic Ductan. *Daughters of Muscadine*. Lexington: Fireside, 2023. Pp. 144. \$24.95. Hardcover.

Monic Ductan's story "Gullah Babies" was published in SCR 52.1.

Monic Ductan's *Daughters of Muscadine* is a collection of stories set in the Black South that explore how characters deal with death, how they cope with loss, and the complicated feelings of both desiring someone's love and hating the hurt that comes with it. Written in the form of the Queen Mother Gloria Naylor's *Bailey's Café* and *Women of Brewster Place*, each character is given his/her/their own stories and the stories are not linked through a clear narrative arc, a set time, or interpersonal relationships. The town of Muscadine is the central location that binds the stories; death, loss, and love are central concerns; and narrators and characters have cameos in each other's stories. In this way, it is reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Junot Diaz's *Drown*, and Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, which explore place through the interconnected experiences of the place. *Daughters of Muscadine* uses death and loss as entry points into the characters' most vulnerable moments when they need love the most.

It starts with several murders. The first sentence is, "In Muscadine, there's a legend about my great-grandmother, Ida Pearl Crawley, who was lynched for killing a white family, the Munsons" (1). Herbert Munson was her employer, her landlord, and the secret father of her two children. After being hanged on the Munson Plantation, Pearl becomes a haint. When the narrator in the first story meets her, he says, "Pearl spoke to me, but her lips didn't move. Instead, she held my gaze, and I read the words right out of her head. *Every generation, one of us will kill one of our own. That can't be stopped. Every generation, a bloodshed*" (12). This prophecy haunts the rest of the book as we encounter Black and White descendants of Herbert Munson, as we experience the aftermath of

Lucy Boudreaux's drowning as a high school senior, and as we witness her teammates at different stages in their lives. Some characters struggle with multiple losses, like Kasha, who loses her parents, teammate, and grandmother. For some characters, the loss is still to come, like June Anne Crawley, who overcomes the fear of sitting with her father, while he is on his deathbed.

Concurrent with these losses are confessions of loneliness and the need for love. June Anne wants to seek comfort in her brother while dealing with her father's impending death, but she feels she has lost her brother to his new fiancé. She says, "For a moment, I wished our mama was still alive. She had died when I was four. I barely remembered her at all, and I usually only missed her when I felt scared or lonely" (66-67). Meanwhile, her father also "gets lonesome" (68) being alone on his deathbed and her brother, being the sole caretaker and provider for the family. Each character in some way tried to latch onto another to stave off loneliness. Considering this thread of loneliness, Macy, whose best friend Lucy dies, summarizes it best:

...sometimes I come to the games to get out of the house and fight off the loneliness, and at other times I want to roll into that loneliness where no one can reach me. Lately, I've wanted to sleep more often than not. My friend Rachel says it's depression, but she's seen too many movies and thinks everyone is depressed. (49)

These characters can't define their heartache beyond "lonesome," "lonely," and "alone." They don't know how to navigate through their grief to get to the other side. The most they know to do is reach out to family, a lover, or a friend.

As characters wade through the slog of death and loneliness, they maintain a distance from traditional religion and religious solace. The most traditionally religious character is the one of the white descendants of Herbert Munson, an aspiring preacher and ardent racist who leads a prayer meeting. On the other hand, the most non-traditionally spiritual characters are Lucy Boudreaux and her grandmother:

Lucy and her family had moved to our town in north Georgia from Louisiana, and Lucy was the most superstitious person any of us had ever seen. She always carried a little pouch, and during games she tied the pouch to her bra strap. She called it a gris-gris and said hers was for good luck but that some used gris-gris to cast spells on enemies.... "You never heard of voodoo?" Lucy had demanded, trying to coax us all into carrying a gris-gris. "Y'all Black, ain't y'all?" (18)

Other than these two incidents, characters either don't mention a religious tradition or

they admit to struggling with it. For example, Lena says, “The only strong feeling I’d ever had in church was a headache” (112) and June says, “I never, ever felt the presence of any sort of god in our church services.... I felt guilty for not believing. Somehow, I thought that reading the Torah and praying as a Jew would make me feel different or right.... Reading it made me feel no different...” (70–71). After each time June’s failed attempts to bond with her brother or to trump his new fiancée, she dives deeper into *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* and mimics of limited version of that religious practice. It is both a rejection of her family’s religious tradition and a yearning for some kind of love.

In fact, in the final scene of the book, Lynne destroys a portrait of White Jesus, in the church where she experienced racism from some of the White descendants of Herbert Munson. Stepping back as a reader, Lynne and her friends create an inverted tableau of a church service: Kasha at the pulpit pantomiming a preacher; Richie at the back wafting cigar smoke, like incense; and Lynne as a congregant in the pews. Through Lynne’s eyes, the image of Jesus takes on the characteristics of Janice Munson “long, hillbilly hair and pale skin,” with “a hint of condescension in those eyes.” She then describes an experience that seems similar to being possessed by the Holy Ghost. She says, “Smug Jesus suddenly irritated all hell out of me.... Something festered inside me, and I didn’t realize how much until I had reached up, pulled white Jesus from the wall and brought his image down over the back of one of the pews” (133). She hadn’t planned to vandalize the church. Something inside of her took over her body, without her full awareness. It’s as if Lynne’s mind went blank and either the Holy Spirit or the Crawley curse takes over as “One of us murdering one of our own” (12).

This book is for people who love voice. Except for a few stories in the middle, the dialogue is primarily written in the Black Southern rural language of the 1980’s, where a couple might “go around together” and might eventually “do[] it” (1). Someone can “laugh[] like it’s going out of style” (2). To make a request, a person must “[s]ee can” (6) they do something. Like, one might see can they “turn the field after work on Wednesday” (35). Folks here drink “Co-cola” (28) call their daughters “Miss Lady” (60) and measure things in passels, like “a passel of silly questions” (110). This book is for people who enjoy first person narratives. Ductan leans into the limitations of this perspective. There were several times I found myself holding the concerns, tensions, and grudges of a character, just to realize later that I had been seduced by Monic Ductan’s writing into believing a limited perspective. (Isn’t that life?) It’s also for people who feel a reverence for place and history, without romanticizing them or making the landscapes pastoral, where insiders get to live and breathe without much presence of outsiders, and where time, especially during grief, does not operate in a linear fashion.