



The Warmest December by Bernice McFadden

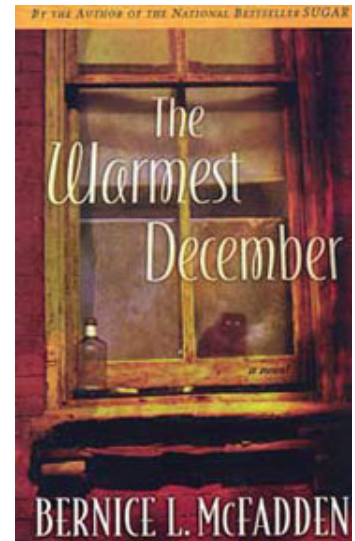
Moving Forward While the Wicked Sleep

In her intensely moving second novel, *The Warmest December*, Bernice McFadden depicts a young woman struggling to rid herself of the painful influence of her abusive father and the legacy of alcohol dependence that she is left with in his wake. The follow-up to McFadden's highly acclaimed, best-selling book, *Sugar*, centers around the life of Kenzie Lowe, a woman subjected to the memories of a childhood lived in complete helplessness and humiliation, and left with an adulthood plagued by the memories of chronic alcoholic Hy-Lo, a name that appropriately reflects his erratic mood swings.

Kenzie is surprised to find out that "One day last week I forgot that I hated my father, forgot that I even thought of him as a monster." Though constantly reminded that his absence hasn't completely wiped the memories of Hy-Lo away, Kenzie is nevertheless compelled to visit him almost daily as he lies comatose in a hospital bed.

Through the hours of quiet reflection during her repeated visits, she discovers the perfect way to rid herself of his influence even as she struggles with forgiveness of the seemingly unforgivable. Through seamless transitions between the graceful narration of the present and Kenzie's somber reflection of the turbulent realities that permeate her memories, McFadden carefully shapes both Kenzie's and the reader's understanding of the events that shaped her life.

Both the frequency of the attacks and their severity make reading of this book quite painful at times, yet the author effectively holds the readers interest and emotion with Kenzie's haunting recollections. One such incident finds Kenzie on one of her dreadful marches to Hy-Lo's dresser drawer to choose her father's weapons of choice for her beatings, three belts of identical width and length. "We agonized over which one would hurt the least."



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McFadden's concise description of the Lowe family's tragedy exhibits a solemn wisdom of human emotion in the midst of hardship, yet the reader is also treated to intervals of witty, perceptive illustration of the changing faces of Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood and its inhabitants.

The Warmest December chronicles the legacy of fear that alcoholics pass to their children through violence and addiction with heart wrenching drama and constantly building tension. Themes of recovery, forgiveness, and accountability are colored with a voice that is sometimes subtle and delicate, other times acutely blunt. To ward off the overwhelming compassion for her dying father, Kenzie would force herself "to remember the smell of hate, the feel of pain, and the sense of rejection that he instilled in me every single day of my life, and my hate would bloom again."

Kenzie's mother implores her not to forgive Hy-Lo, to which Kenzie replies that she didn't "want to talk about forgiveness with a woman who'd forgiven her life away, and mine right along with it. "A life defined by so much pain and hatred demands that Kenzie's recovery include far more than just abstinence from alcohol. McFadden deals with the complex problems of this family realistically, and demonstrates her obvious understanding by avoiding a contrived or universal remedy to her characters' disappointments.

Reviewed by Jacob Malmberg