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**Kelli Jo Ford. *Crooked Hallelujah*. Grove Press, 2020. 288 pp. ISBN: 9780802149121.**

<https://bookshop.org/books/crooked-hallelujah-9780802149138/9780802149121>

When we seek to understand trauma, we must remember above all else, the body always keeps the score. In Kelli Jo Ford's *Crooked Hallelujah*, she explores the limits that a body can withstand before it succumbs to the harsh violence tallied from its traumatic encounters. Above all else, *Crooked Hallelujah* is a story of trauma. Ford's powerful novel details the harrowing story of Justine Barnes and her search for freedom: a freedom from trauma, broken dreams, and the plight of the internal child she leaves behind in motherhood. The Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, one of the main settings in the novel, is painted as a land where trauma entrenches itself into the bodies of all who live there. Such deep-seated pain and sorrow have their origins in the geopolitical fallout from the Trail of Tears and the ontological terror this historical act of violence imposes upon Native bodies. Ford's text is a literary engagement with trauma's elusive duality: the twisted darkness Justine's family harbours is what both binds them together and keeps them hopelessly imprisoned.

Structurally, the text flows with a heightened urgency, despite certain chapters of narration – namely the chapter narrated by Pitch's father – failing to meet the higher standard set by others. Ford is deft in revealing the many layers to the female souls in her novel but does not achieve this same effect with male characters like Pitch and his father. While the matriarchs of Justine's family are robust and powerfully human, the male characters in *Crooked Hallelujah* fail to replicate that same human intensity. Wes, Kenny, Russell Gibson, and the other masculine characters all exude a violent streak exasperated by poorly hidden agendas and flat developmental arcs. The narrative shifts in the novel to Pitch's father and Mose Lee lack the same hardened vulnerability present with Justine and her daughter, Reney. These shifts seem unnecessary and tangential to the core of the novel, particularly because Ford could have used those sections to flesh out the ending climax. Because the male characters are wooden, the relationships they have with the female characters are less enjoyable to read. Despite these small faults, the Cherokee world Ford creates is captivating. The words on the page read with such cinematic potential as Walter Dean Myers' YA novel *Monster* (1999) and expose a harsh reality some people refuse to accept.

Ford's text asks readers to consider the implications arising from history's cyclical nature and the trauma created from the clash between the external and the internal. In the early parts of Ford's novel, we are introduced to a young Justine entrenched in conflict; while navigating the oppressive nature of her community's religion, she must reconcile being the victim of sexual violence and the shame following this trauma. Between the oppression she faces from her religious community to her eventual downfall, Justine's story prompts vital questions of how haunting travels from body to body, leaving ruin in its wake. Justine's shame and regret remain palpable forces influencing every facet of her life, from the terrible men she surrounds herself with to the desperate hope she clings onto that Reney will have a better life than herself. The mothers in Ford's novel all occupy the murky intersection between trauma and destiny as evidenced when Justine pleads to Reney to break the family's traumatic cycle:

When I started pulling away that summer—doing what kids do—she'd [Justine] lived exactly half her life doing all she could to make sure my life was better than hers. After taking stock of all the ways we matched and saying, "Good night my Tiny Teeny Reney," she'd hold me close and whisper, "Don't be like me. Don't ever be like me." (97)

Ford is clever and effective in demonstrating how Reney is Justine's way of reconciling the sexual violence done to her: Reney's characterization is a phenomenological exploration into how something so beautiful can come from a place so dark. By having Reney, Justine had to give up on the child within herself she could never save and tries to find this child in Reney. The mother-daughter relationships in the novel are constant negotiations centered around freedom, religion, and the power one wields amidst economically disenfranchised environments. In reading Ford's text, I found myself thinking about the connections between her writing and that of Margaret Atwood and John Rollin Ridge, particularly with how Ford explores societal colonization of bodies. *Crooked Hallelujah* and Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta: The Celebrated California Bandit* (1854) both lie at the intersection of race and agency and work to expose the immediacy of Native literature. In their respective texts, both Ridge and Ford explore the traumatic struggles of people stuck between two very different worlds: for Ford's Justine, she is caught between religion and freedom, while Ridge's Murieta is caught between revenge and closure. The oppression of women in *Crooked Hallelujah* invokes similar questions on religion and power as Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, but I hope a reader's discomfort with the oppression of Justine and Reney provides a powerful perspective on the plight of Native women.

Despite some minimal character considerations, *Crooked Hallelujah* is an important text depicting a modern Native experience. Justine's and Reney's sufferings are Cherokee in nature, but human in impact. Ford's writing serves as an essential retort to the Native erasure embedded within the American racial consciousness. Her message is prophetic and a humbling reminder to those who feel destined to repeat the history from which they are so desperately trying to run away. *Crooked Hallelujah* is a testament to Native bodies everywhere suffering under the weight of survival in a society that refuses to see them. In the critical vein of Judith Butler and Avery Gordon, Ford posits her characters as victims of a history they inadvertently repeat despite their best efforts to break free from the chains that suppress the freedom they deserve. In her writing, Ford seeks to expose the flawed and broken human condition that transcends environment, sex, and race. With each page, I found myself more and more drawn to Justine and Reney, desperately pleading to the two women to pursue something more than the life they have accepted. Therein lies the palpable power of Ford's writing: each broken female character demonstrated a deep emotional complexity, forcing me to consider the fixed judgment we so often bestow upon others and the internal responsibility we exercise in healing.

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#### Works Cited

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