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In the Garden of Stone by Susan Tekulve

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Abstract

Review of *In the Garden of Stone* by Susan Tekulve

Keywords

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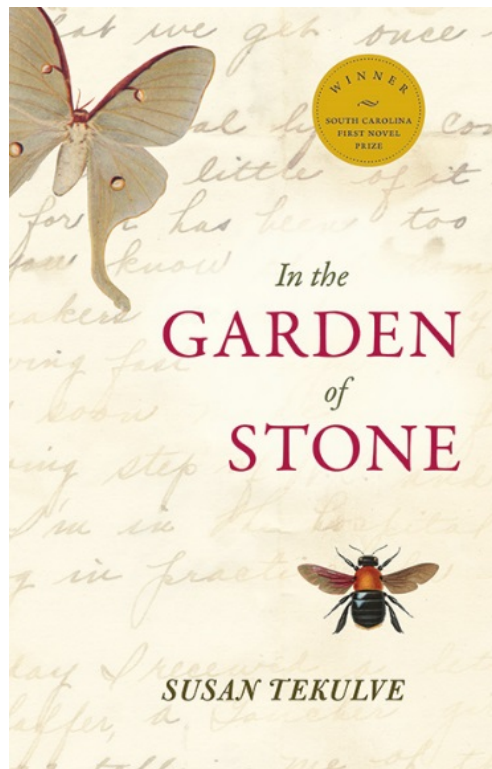
BOOK REVIEW

In the Garden of Stone by Susan Tekulve
Hub City Press, 2013, \$17.95

Winner of the 2012 South Carolina First Novel Prize, *In the Garden of Stone* is the story of fifty years in the life of an Appalachian family. It begins in 1924 with sixteen-year-old Emma Palmisano. Emma's father is a Sicilian immigrant who came to America to work in the coal mines. Her mother, a former teacher, has been beaten down by the dirt and fear that are constants of life in a coal mining village. She is mean-spirited and suffers from frequent bouts of depression, and has retreated into a fervent but morose version of her adopted Catholicism. When a railroad accident buries their house in a carload of coal, Emma is pulled out by Caleb Sypher, a young railroad man. Caleb treats her gently, and wipes her cut and dirty feet with clean white handkerchiefs. Emma is undone by his tenderness: "She could take the pain in her body, but this man's kindness made her want to sit cross-legged on the ground and weep." She knows in that moment she will follow him anywhere. They marry a week later and travel to Caleb's homestead in Virginia, forty-seven acres of pristine mountain farmland.

Caleb lived in Italy while serving in World War I and several years afterward. His native desire for beauty was well schooled there, and he works to make his and Emma's home a lovely and gracious place. He brings Emma gifts of furnishings and china, and even builds an Italian garden with a waterfall and pool. Sunday dinners are glorious affairs, plates filled with

dishes such as "rabbits braised with honey and vinegar, covered with wild onions and figs." Though a little overwhelmed at first, Emma realizes, "Before Caleb,[she] had never met a man who bought books and read them to her. He was the only man she'd ever known who used the words *soul* and *beauty*. He was the only man to make her a bed out of cotton." They have a son, Dean, and proceed happily for the most part, even through the Depression years, until a tragic event changes their lives forever. No spoilers here, but the story follows Dean's life, his wife Sadie's, and their daughter Hannah's through 1973.



In the Garden of Stone was a joy to read. The language is beautiful, lyrical but never overblown. The characters are real, fully drawn, all human, all flawed to some degree. Even the minor characters whose lives are interwoven with the story -- Sadie's "outlaw" half Cherokee mother Jane, or Emma's Aunt Maria, who once ran away with a man, but returned to the village and spends the rest of her life cooking sumptuous meals for single miners -- feel alive and breathing.

Tekulve uses an interesting narrative technique. Each chapter focuses on one character, and is told from that character's point of view. It illuminates a specific instance or critical period that is a turning point in that character's life. This allows the author to mine the character's interior life fully, and to show others from a

different point of view. The result is almost like a set of interrelated short stories.

The book imparts a powerful sense of place, and how those places affect the lives of the people living in them. The contrast could not be greater between the soul-killing mining village and the soul-sustaining mountain wilderness homestead. One of book's great charms is the rich description of the Appalachian countryside – the native plants and animals, the way the light and shadows move among the mountain peaks, the mountain streams with brown trout hiding in pools.

The book also brings to life some of the history and culture of Appalachia. It provides a fascinating window into the immigrant experience, details of life in a coal mining town, and the dynamics of railroad labor disputes during the Depression years. It offers a glimpse of traditional Cherokee knowledge of the land, and what contemporary life is like for some of the descendants of the Cherokee who managed to avoid removal. In her acknowledgments, Tekulve thanks her mother-in-law and a member of her own family for sharing their family stories with her. She notes that both women passed away before the book was completed, "but their voices linger on in its pages." Those living voices, nurtured and shaped by the author, surely account for some of this novel's vivid quality. I was left wanting to hear more.

Literary fiction, recommended for academic and public libraries. The author teaches writing at Converse College in Spartanburg.

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