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Miss Jane: A Novel



Synopsis

Longlisted for the National Book Award for Fiction: Astonishing prose brings to life a forgotten woman and a lost world in a strange and bittersweet Southern pastoral. Since his award-winning debut collection of stories, *Last Days of the Dog-Men*, Brad Watson has been expanding the literary traditions of the South, in work as melancholy, witty, strange, and lovely as any in America. Now, drawing on the story of his own great-aunt, Watson explores the life of Miss Jane Chisolm, born in rural, early-twentieth-century Mississippi with a genital birth defect that would stand in the way of the central "uses" for a woman in that time and place: sex and marriage. From the highly erotic world of nature around her to the hard tactile labor of farm life, from the country doctor who befriends her to the boy who loved but was forced to leave her, Miss Jane Chisolm and her world are anything but barren. The potency and implacable cruelty of nature, as well as its beauty, is a trademark of Watson's fiction. In *Miss Jane*, the author brings to life a hard, unromantic past that is tinged with the sadness of unattainable loves, yet shot through with a transcendent beauty. Jane Chisolm's irrepressible vitality and generous spirit give her the strength to live her life as she pleases in spite of the limitations that others, and her own body, would place on her. Free to satisfy only herself, she mesmerizes those around her, exerting an unearthly fascination that lives beyond her still.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In a novel sure to draw initial comparisons with Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*, Brad Watson imagines the life of a woman with a difference so great that it has the power to leave her feeling utterly alone in the world. Comparisons with *Middlesex* are warranted, Jane is conceived in a, let's say baleful coupling, and though she appears in nearly every way to be a normal child there is one great difference that will result in a lifetime of being an outsider. Comparisons between the two novels should stop there. Miss Jane is not in any way derivative, and in fact Watson has drawn on the true life experiences of his own Great Aunt who suffered from the exact condition described in the novel. The result is a heartfelt exploration of loneliness, acceptance and happiness expertly guided by a taut prose that seems to own the language and experience of those times. I don't plan to reveal any more about Jane's problem except to say that is a congenital anomaly of the genitals. I felt that Watson purposefully held back on the details, adding them bit by bit as the novel progressed, and this slow reveal of the diagnosis and its prognosis gave me some sense of the uncertainty, melancholy and mystery that Jane (and her real life model) must have felt in earlier times. One of the great strengths of this novel is its look at early 20th century medicine. Watson accomplishes this through the character of a sage, country doctor who has spurned the big hospitals and East Coast opportunities of his medical school colleagues and has chosen to remain in the south, serving mostly the poor. In one of the novel's opening and most interesting scenes, this Dr. Thompson comes home tired and a bit intoxicated to find his porch full of several of the county's afflicted.

First off, let me say that there is a kind of old-fashioned sweetness about this book and its title character that makes it a pure pleasure to read, and Brad Watson obviously knows his rural Mississippi setting of the early 20th century and uses it to great advantage. That said, the subject matter - the unavoidable central focus of the story - is sometimes difficult to read about. Because Jane Chisolm, born at home in 1915, was marked by a rare birth defect which would have a profound effect on her life. Her condition is finally given a name in a pamphlet given to her at age sixteen by the doctor who delivered her. "She sat down on her bed, set down the pamphlet, looked again at the drawing. Read the words she'd never seen or heard before printed there, defining her: 'Urogenital sinus anomaly. Persistent cloaca.' They made no sense." To explain: a urogenital sinus anomaly is a defect in which the urethra and vagina both open into a common channel. A persistent

cloaca is a disorder whereby the rectum, vagina, and urinary tract meet and fuse, creating a cloaca, a single common channel. And in Jane's particular case the condition was exacerbated by a lack of sphincter control. Simply put, she had no control over her basest bodily functions, and was forced to wear a kind of diaper her whole life. And yet .. and yet. MISS JANE is an admirable and compelling character, because in all other ways she is a normal little girl, who matures into an attractive young woman with a normal sexual curiosity, urges, feelings and emotions. Which makes it doubly sad for her to finally be able to put words to her chronic problem just as she is falling in love with a boy from a neighboring farm. But she knows it will only end in disappointment. And it does.

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