



Jesus in the Mist: Stories

Paul Ruffin

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"Mister, most stories about people are sad. The ones about animals sometimes turn out all right, but not them about people," muses a character in master storyteller Paul Ruffin's yarn of obsession and quest "In Search of the Tightrope Walker." Raging against this fated sadness—and often against a deadening and inescapable status quo—the characters in Ruffin's newest collection, *Jesus in the Mist*, populate an imaginative vision of the hardscrabble Deep South where history, culture, and expectations are set firmly against them.

Like Flannery O'Connor before him, Ruffin views the South as dark with humor and rife with violence. He writes of places and times where religion, race, class, sex, abuse, poverty, mythology, and morbidity coalesce to expose humanity at its basest and its most redeeming. Peppered with the vivid dialogue, colorful descriptions, and idiosyncratic comedy that define Ruffin's work, this volume is divided into two sections: the first group of stories addresses complexities of relationships between men and women, and the second recounts episodes of initiation in which characters grapple with divided loyalties.

Collectively these stories paint a panoramic view of Southern culture as dynamic characters take a stab at their destinies—and sometimes at each other. Whether they are facing the visage of Christ in a motel bathroom mirror, blasting a murder of crows with military-grade artillery, outrunning a mythical beast through moonlit woods, or taking an armed stance against integration at a gas station water fountain, many of Ruffin's characters are zealots on the edge of reason. Here confidence men, thugs, and rednecks push their agendas on unsuspecting audiences. But there are those as well who search for a lost childhood love, exorcise a sexual predator from the home, return to a discarded life, and spare a man's life when no one would be the wiser. These individuals long for restoration, redemption, and righteousness. Both populations come together in Ruffin's South, where madness and faith hold equal sway and no amount of sadness can keep yearned-for possibilities from still being perceived as attainable.

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