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Low Country: A Southern Memoir

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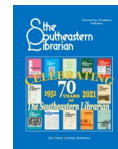
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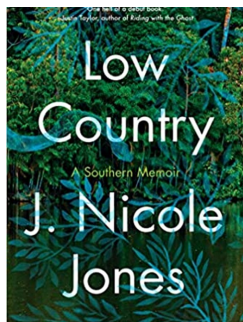
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REVIEWS

Low Country: A Southern Memoir



J. Nicole Jones
New York: Catapult, 2021
ISBN: 9781948226868
240 p. \$26.00 (Hbk)

A promotional blurb in Goodreads states that J. Nicole Jones's *Low Country* is "*The Glass Castle* meets *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*." One could just as easily say that the book is Tara Westover's *Educated* meets Netflix's *Ozark*. Needless to say, *Low Country* is a complicated memoir.

Jones begins by writing about the ghost of a woman she claims she saw. Throughout her memoir, she relays stories and legends about other Carolinian ghosts and the pirates that plundered the South Carolina coast. Some readers will find these accounts captivating, while others will find them gimmicky. Pirates and ghosts are the hook in *Low Country*, but the hurricanes, misdeeds of men, and financial setbacks are the real haunts. Her memoir also includes incidents of domestic violence by the men in the Jones family, nuggets of coastal Southern history, the pursuit of education as a means of opportunity and escape, and an account of how her grandfather used money pocketed from bootlegging to build and run resort hotels, bars, and restaurants in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina.

What readers make of Jones's memoir depends very much on the reader. Her memoir is less about her own life and more about her family members—especially the women. Jones writes, "I come from a line of women for whom being walked all over and jumped on for the fun of cruelty was progress" (p. 6). The family stories she relays are sometimes humorous, devastating, or exasperating. All too often, they are also heart-breaking.

Jones depicts her paternal grandfather

and patriarch in unsparing terms, noting that his defining qualities were violence and racism. Jones focuses much of her attention on his long-suffering wife, whom Jones adored. Her grandmother, Nana, devoted herself to loving her grandchildren and turning the other cheek, much to the dismay of Jones. Her parents had a hard-scrabble existence because her grandfather refused to share his wealth with his sons. It didn't help that misfortune seemed to find them every time they started to get ahead. To make matters worse, her father invited trouble when he purchased a bar and used the profits to subsidize his alcoholism.

The subtitle of this book is "A Southern Memoir"—which it is... and isn't. Peppered in her writing are references and tidbits about the culture and environment in the Coastal South. But the broad themes of domestic violence, rising and falling fortunes, and the desire to escape the patterns of abuse, addiction, and criminality shaped by generations of men in the family aren't distinctly Southern. In fact, one of the strengths of *Low Country* is the light Jones shines on hard working folks like her parents that struggle to get by working in tourist towns. Jones writes, "The inland tourists, the rubberneckers, the college kids, the Canadians, they were good for nothing but traffic and trouble" (p. 123). Her contempt for tourists should strike a chord with workers in tourist locales like Panama City, Virginia Beach, Ocean City, and even Lake of the Ozarks.

Those who need books to unfold in a linear fashion will surely be disappointed with *Low Country*. Jones rejects telling stories the way men do and "chucks" the Aristotelian rules for something more feminine (p. 100). She instead chooses to tell stories the way her family members did when she was growing up. As a result, the construction of *Low Country* is akin to that of a quilt—the family stories are the fabric pieces that become whole when stitched together. When seen from a distance, the memoir is either a work of art or a crazy quilt.

Recommended for public and academic libraries.

Kristine Stilwell, University of North Georgia