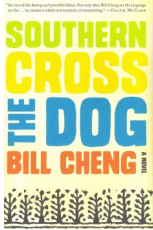


Voodoo, Blues, and Wandering after the Great Flood



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This first novel by an Asian-American has already created a lot of buzz. First, it has an intriguing topic: Mississippi after the great flood of 1927. Secondly: the main characters are compelling--they are very poor African-Americans under the yoke of the white inhabitants. Finally, it shows exquisite writing. William Ferris said, "Bill Cheng embraces the region's 1927 flood, voodoo, blues, and race with breathtakingly beautiful prose."

Southern Cross the Dog starts with a group of black children playing "Little Sally Water" in the rain--the rain that caused the great flood. Soon the story focuses on the character of Robert, the second born child of Etta and Ellis. Before long, you discover that his family has just suffered an immense tragedy. White vigilantes had hung the oldest son Billy for loving a white girl.

Bill Cheng captures the chaos and hardship after the flood. Dead bodies floated past. Men with boats offered rides but also stole the food and valuable keepsakes of the displaced families. Robert's family began this journey together, but ended up in a refugee camp. Because Etta has lost her mind over Billy's death, she needs constant care. Ellis makes a difficult decision: to send young Robert off with someone to work in another town. Ellis thinks this is the only way all three of them will survive but he mistakenly does not tell his son why he is sending him away. Thus begins Robert's odyssey through a state ravaged by not only by a flood but also by great poverty, hatred, and racism. He works at a warehouse doing chores where he befriends a great bluesman who has just been released from jail so he can make an alcoholic entrepreneur rich. He works as a laborer on the great dam that will prevent more floods. Everywhere Robert goes he feels haunted and obsessed by his past. During the dam-building, he becomes an explosive expert, taking more and more chances. When a piece of expensive equipment becomes untethered and floats away in the river's current, he dives in after it. Later, a Cajun trapper family rescues him. But Robert's demons always force him to wander.

It's almost as though he is trying to kill himself, but never deliberately so. The bluesman has given him a small flannel bag to wear around his neck to protect him.

This book, rich in believable characters--many cruel, a few very kind--is a terrific read that teaches you a lot about humanity.

If this book spurs your interest in the famous flood depicted here, read David Welky's *The Thousand-Year Flood*.

Posted by Dory L. on June 4, 2013

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