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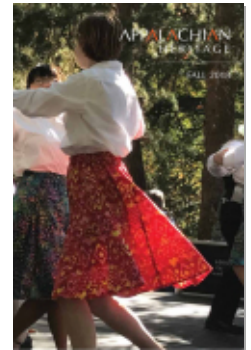
Their Houses by Meredith Sue Willis (review)

Emily Masters

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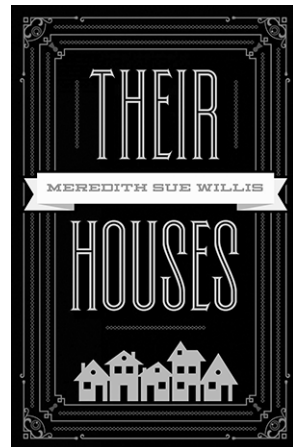
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BOOK REVIEW

Meredith Sue Willis. *Their Houses*. Morgantown, W.Va.: West Virginia University Press, 2018. 252 pages. Softcover. \$19.99.

Reviewed by Emily Masters

Meredith Sue Willis's new novel, *Their Houses*, focuses on the lives of two sisters (Grace and Dinah) and their childhood friend Richie. Willis, who has authored twenty-two books including *A Space Apart* (1979) and *Love Palace* (2014), here writes an unpredictable, and at times, convoluted, novel about the ways in which the three main characters have found themselves on divergent paths in life, and how they are all pulled back together. The novel features characters who are falling apart, characters who uplift each other, and memories that threaten to topple old bonds.



When Richie discovers he has a chronic illness, he devises a plan to get Dinah and Grace to come back to him so they will all be back in the same place like old times. He moves to the same town where Grace lives with her husband and children. He hooks Dinah's prisoner-turned-priest husband into returning by offering him a job as an airwave preacher, tricking Dinah back into his life without revealing his true identity. With Grace's encouragement, Dinah comes back to live near her and to help her through the depression she is experiencing. Dinah returns to face a world in which she and her husband cannot so fully shield their children from a world lacking in the religiosity they deem so important. Together, Dinah, Grace, Richie, and their families work through issues that have lingered from their childhoods, learning to weave together a tentative community despite their differences.

The characters in *Their Houses* are well-developed and quirky. Grace and Dinah, who grew up in a broken household after their mother suffered from a mental breakdown and their father turned to alcoholism, have chosen opposite paths in life: Grace leads a conventional married mainstream lifestyle, while Dinah is married to a preacher and chooses to shelter her children from a non-Christian world. Their childhood friend, Richie uses his riches to bring the sisters back into his life and is particularly interested in Dinah whom he has always loved. Perhaps the most distinctive character in the novel, however, is Aleda, Dinah's fifteen-year-old daughter who is bucking up against her family's traditional values and wants to strike out on a more progressive path.

Themes in Willis's novel include family, community, religion, friendship, mental illness, sexual assault, and coming of age. Willis toys with the boundaries of family, both blood and bond. Richie desperately wants the kind of family bond he knew from his childhood spent with Dinah and Grace, but

Dinah particularly wants to cut all ties to her rocky past and embrace the future she has found in her religion and with her children. Aleda is biracial and consumed by curiosity about her biological father, but she loves her stepfather, Raymond, as if he is her true father.

Perhaps the most fulfilling aspect about Willis's novel is the way it engages themes of mental and physical illness. Using Grace and her mother, Willis writes about depression and psychosis in an artful way, paying due diligence to the complexity of these illnesses. Dinah and Grace's mother is represented as deeply troubled by the voices in her head, trying to convince her to kill her own children but unable to maintain control of her mental faculties, leading their father to institutionalize her. Their father, unable to cope with his grief at losing the woman he loves to her own mind, turns to alcohol, eventually letting it consume his life, leaving Dinah as the one responsible for herself and Grace. One of the lines from the book that best represents the way the two young girls had to grapple with their parents' illnesses is when Grace reflects, "They always used the proper words, to remind themselves that they were speaking of illnesses: their father was an alcoholic; their mother was psychotic." After suffering from postpartum depression, Grace fears she is turning into her mother, that she will one day share the desire to harm those she loves most. Richie, too, suffers from a physical illness with the Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS) he inherited from his father, which he self-medicates using marijuana.

While Willis's characters are engaging, their relationship and the way they are brought back together is at times confusing and somewhat unbelievable. The fact that Richie creates a compound just to bring back two sisters who he has not seen in years will force readers to suspend disbelief. Raymond, Dinah's preacher husband, is all too quick to jump

at the opportunity to work for Richie who employs two of his old convict buddies when he places so much emphasis on how much his life has changed in favor of the Lord. The writing seems almost to border on fantastical at moments like these when almost any other outcome would seem more likely than the one at hand.

Even though there are moments that do not quite ring true in *Their Houses*, the characters themselves certainly do. Through them, Willis provides an artful examination of both physical and mental illnesses, and reveals the struggle that often goes on behind the scene for children who grow up with parents suffering from such conditions. These qualities, coupled with the increased attention being paid to mental illnesses globally, make this novel a timely, relatable read. ■

Jesse Graves & William Wright. *Specter Mountain*. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2018. 67 pages. Softcover. \$16.00.

Reviewed by James Owens

In his poem, “How to be a Poet,” Wendell Berry advises, “Stay away from anything / that obscures the place it is in.” This is essential wisdom, certainly for a poet, but equally for any person or any group of people, no matter how large or seemingly powerful. A nation or a civilization is a lesser thing than the earth where it has sprung into being, and these make barely a flicker against the background of deep, geological time, though

