Georgia on My Mind

May 1, 2002 By Nina Herzog

Bear Me Safely Over

By Sheri Joseph
Atlantic Monthly Press, $23

The title of Pushcart Prize and National Magazine Award finalist Sheri Joseph's debut novel-of-sorts is taken from an old Christian hymn about (what else?) being lost then found, bruised then healed and ultimately saved. Joseph gets off to a clunky start with a first chapter in the underdeveloped voice of card-board Curtis, a thick-headed, brutish homophobe (the first song he learned to play on the guitar was Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Freebird"), who spends his energy trying not to love his fiancée, Sidra, and to resist the urge to kill his queer step-brother, Paul. Marcy, Sidra's younger sister who died of AIDS before turning 20, haunts the work. After its initial stumble, *Bear Me*, set in rural and urban Georgia, embarks on an entrancing and ultimately exhilarating journey through death, sex, homophobia, Christian fundamentalism, drug use and, finally, rapture.

In a nod to Sherwood Anderson, Paul is reading *Winesburg, Ohio*, the first modern novel of interconnected stories centering around a town -- a clear influence on Joseph in her writing, as each chapter is narrated from the viewpoint of a different character. Joseph breaks with Anderson in the penultimate chapter, a 100-plus page chorus of voices in which the book's myriad characters draw closer together -- and closer to marrying, leaving and even killing one another. Though the form works well as the book's pace quickens, some chapters feel unfinished while others stand alone as complete tales.

After coming home to a house adorned with graffiti ("Burn in hell faggot"), Paul abandons rural Georgia to live with Sidra and her mother in college-town Athens. Like Marcy, he seems on a collision course with life. But while Marcy wanted to transcend life through drugs and wandering ("There's nothing can kill you after all. The more you face what scares you, the more immortal you become"), Paul tries to screw his way into oblivion. But through Paul, Sidra's family gets another symbolic chance to prevent a family tragedy.

After a disappointing start, *Bear Me* builds, chapter by chapter, a euphony of voices searching for answers and salvation. By the end, this promising young writer delivers the reader to a dim, still place of warmth and remembrance -- beyond regret, beyond even the limits of mortality. "Then He'll bear me safely over," the hymn goes, "where the loved ones I shall meet."

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