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James Still , Carol Boggess , Silas House

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The tale of a young boy who travels from Alabama to Texas in search of work on a cotton farm. He finds a ranch owned by a couple where he learns many important life lessons.

Chinaberry Details

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From Reader Review Chinaberry for online ebook

Roni says

Small book with big impact. Loved the exploration of relationships and tension among the characters. Found myself thinking about the book long after I had finished reading it. Chinaberry is one of those books you really need to talk about after reading it.

Dustincecil says

I hesitate to say this, for fear of sounding like a teenager... but this story is so weird!

beautifully written- but awkwardly caught somewhere between an expression of grief, and a social services home visit report.

I'm interested to see what stands out in my memory about this story years from now.

Donna says

I can believe that this book meant a lot to James Still, even though it remained unfinished at his death. The plot is simple really, but the story is not. I read River of Earth recently, and though that book was set closer to my Appalachia, this tale set in Texas feels even more familiar to me, or at least to my memories of my elders' memories. And that's what Chinaberry is all about. I wish Still was here to answer all the questions he left with this story, but maybe that's exactly why he never finished it in his lifetime; now he can leave the answers to us.

Jeff says

My grandfather relished any opportunity to reminisce about the time he spent in his youth at what he referred to as the Haner Place. To him in his memories, it was a special place and time. Chinaberry is James Still's Haner Place. This short novel tells the story of a 13 year old boy who accompanies several Alabama men on an extended trip to Texas in the early part of the 20th century. Much of the story revolves around a childless couple who own a large range and take a special interest in the boy. Despite a certain creepy factor in their doting, the writing is concise and lyrical, capturing the time and place and the way memories of youth seem idyllic. I suppose everyone has a Chinaberry or Haner Place in their past.

Ellen Taylor says

My friend from KY sent this for me to read - James Still was a Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction from KY, and this was an unfinished manuscript about a young boy's trip to Texas when a young teenager, which

seems to be pretty autobiographical. The writing was good; great imagery, but that's not my favorite criteria for a great book, thus the 3 stars. A good book for the older set or those who love historical fiction.

Jeffd134 says

A beautiful book too long in the making. But House takes Still's story and gently lays it before us. The story reads as so many are told -- first with a sketch, followed by additions of color and texture.

Billmatt says

Chinaberry didn't hit me in the same way *River of Earth* did, but that's not something to be held against it. If anything, *Chinaberry* will haunt me more than any other Still work.

Within *Chinaberry* James Still crafts a rather simple story about an Alabama boy travelling to Texas to work on a ranch, but there are so many little things that give you an uneasy feeling as you go along. At the same time, it's a book about love in many ways, from man and woman to man and child to man and childhood.

I should clarify that when I say "uneasy" i'm not talking about McCarthy levels of strange, but there are unusual occurrences and encounters that make you raise an eyebrow. Overall, the book is simply beautiful.

The manuscript was left incomplete by Still, but Silas House makes an admirable attempt to reign in this beast of a manuscript. Dedicated James Still readers will be able to tell what comes from Still and what was placed by House, although the original manuscript was nearly complete it did need editing and doesn't exactly follow conventions that Still used in works such as *River of Earth*.

Will all that said, it's an incredible, haunting book. If you're interested in Appalachian literature or James Still in general, take the time to read it. You won't be disappointed, but you will have more questions than answers by the end. That part of Still's works, even with House's editing, is completely intact.

Julie says

Silas House was the editor of the book that I read, and completely captured James Still's descriptive writing. I enjoyed the book very much.

Pam says

Maybe a little partial to Still as he choose Kentucky in which to live and work. If *Chinaberry* is indeed "creatively" autobiographical as critics suggest, I would certainly like to read a full autobiography. Poignant quote: "I never saw them again, I grew up; I remembered."

Gary says

Chinaberry by James Still

Berea: University of Kentucky Press

\$21.95 - 153 pages

I never picked cotton,

but my mother did,

And my brothers did,

And my sisters did,

And my father died young,

workin' in the coal mines.

-Roy Clark, "I Never Picked Cotton"

When I was a child riding the back roads of western North Carolina with my grandfather in his big red Esso truck, he used to point out abandoned farms to me. Many of barns and houses were branded with the three letters GTT. "That means gone to Texas," my grandfather told me. He added that many times the former owners were not really in Texas, but in High Point or in some distant place on the west coast called Sedro Woolley, but people tended to use GTT anyway since it had become a familiar way of saying, "I've had enough."

In the wake of the depression and the dust bowl, poor farmers in the Southeastern United States often heard rumors of fertile lands and rich timber reserves in the east. Some of the cautious ones, reluctant to abandon the "old home place" often sent a family member to investigate.

In a sense that is what happens with Jim, the "going on thirteen" narrator of *Chinaberry*, who leaves Alabama with Ernest, a friend of the family and two local teenagers referred to as "the knuckleheads." They hope to find steady work in Texas and report back to their friends and family in Alabama on such essentials as stable employment, the quality of the water, the food and the climate.

Although the water turned out to be pretty bad, Jim, Ernest and the knuckleheads blunder into employment with a wealthy landowner named Anson Winters who raises cotton and cattle. Jim thinks that he will spend the summer dragging a cotton sack through the tropical Texas heat with hundreds of other pickers. However, while the boy is ruefully considering the shimmering heat and the soul-killing labor awaiting him, a remarkable event occurs. After picking cotton for only a few hours, Anson Winters suddenly informs Jim that he will be living with him and his wife, Lurie in a place called Chinaberry. Jim never picks cotton again.

In many ways, *Chinaberry*, reads like a coming of age fable. Although Jim finds himself transported from poverty and primitive living conditions to a pampered life in a modern home where a doting couple strive to satisfy his every whim, he is homesick. Even as he becomes accustomed to clean clothes and a daily bath, he still watches the mail box, hoping for news from home. Within a short time, he is gaining weight and is spending most of his waking hours with his surrogate father, Anson Winters. Gradually, he learns why Anson Winters is so protective.

Several years prior to Jim's arrival in Chinaberry, Anson had lost his wife Melba, who died in childbirth. This tragedy was followed by another devastating blow: The death of Johannes, Anson's afflicted son who had died at the age of six despite his father's heroic efforts to keep the boy alive. Gradually, Jim comes to understand that both he and Lurie are surrogates and that Anson intends to spend the rest of his life striving to protect his wife and "his new son" from real and imagined dangers. Of course, it is an impossible task.

The story of Anson Winters' struggle to keep his loved ones from harm is heartrending. Especially affecting is the section that recounts the tortured father's daily routine, riding with Johannes cradled in his arms and fresh diapers in his saddlebags. Repeatedly, when the ailing child has seizures and ceases to breath, Anson forces breath back into his lungs and revives him. When Johannes finally dies, Anson attempts suicide several times. Jim also discovers that there are locked rooms in the house which contains the belongings of Johannes and Melba - a kind of memorial to a dead wife and son. It becomes obvious that Anson's attempt to "resurrect" his family are doomed to failure ... but then, life sometimes provides its own alternative which is what happens here.

However, as affecting as the story of Anson Winters is, Chinaberry's greatest merit is James Still's ability to capture the essence of a world that no longer exists. Jim's trek from Chambers County, Alabama to Chinaberry, Texas resonates with vital details. It is a different world - one where women "wear out like a cake of soap," as they struggled with the common tasks of life. In Texas, Jim encounters washing machines powered by gasoline engines, marvels at the size of Texas jack rabbits and the fact that antelope often graze with the cattle. Jim ponders the immensity of a place that is "more sky than earth." Although he is plagued by the ubiquitous ticks and fleas (just like those in Alabama), he learns to treat his bits with Cloverine Salve. He adjusts to a humid world where everyone's hands grasp fans as they eat and/or sit on their porches, and he becomes accustomed to telephones that utilize operators who live at home - and everyone listens to everyone else's phone conversations. On summer nights, the people living in and near Chinaberry are troubled by cyclones and tornados. Summers bring epidemics of Rocky Mountain fever.

Although there is a tendency to comment on the "autobiographical content" in Chinaberry, there seems to be very little justification for that. James Still did not spend a summer in Texas when he was thirteen, although he did make a rapid trip there when he was in his 20's. For readers like me who have always admired Still, I responded to this little novel as a kind of fantasy "with ticks and chiggers." As numerous other Southern writers have noted, the story contained here "could have happened." Jim's journey has much to do with the way that James Still defined home. Is it a place or people? Perhaps it resides in the heart.

(Shortly after James Still's death in 2001, a number of his close friends began putting together some of the author's unpublished works. Among his papers, they found the unpublished manuscript for Chinaberry. Another Kentucky writer, Silas House assumed responsibility for getting this work published.

sylvia woods says

Love it.

Vivian says

One seminal summer on a Texas ranch called "Chinaberry" an undersized thirteen year old boy's existence changes everything for the remarkable rancher Anson and his lovely wife Lurie.

I read this book in an evening during a week when I was listening to an audio recording of Heidi by Spyri.

Surprisingly, there are some corollaries between the two stories. Both characters embark upon a journey, crossing a threshold which separates them from all that was safe or familiar to them. In Heidi's case, it is when her aunt takes her up the alp. In the boy's case, it is when he gets in a car with his father's friend and two teenagers whose aim it is to leave Alabama and find work picking cotton in Texas.

The adventure begins and a helper arrives. In Heidi's case it is her grandfather, better known as the feared Alm Uncle. In the boy's case it is the grieving rancher Anson.

What prize is gained along the way? Both young people profoundly influence the lives of these larger-than-life protectors and both children step into the arena of their young adult years marked with a deeper understanding of and sympathy for human suffering, forgiveness, faith, and hope. Indeed, their lives are forever changed, for they have been part and parcel to a balm of Gilead.

(See <http://rule-of-the-universe.blogspot....> in the "Joseph's Story" post for a more complete--albeit novice--application of the Grand Argument Story Mind model).

The prose and poetry of the author approach that of Harper Lee. More an exercise in character sketch than story, there are elements both haunting and lyrical. The reader will encounter wonder, patience, love, and redemption.

So, why just two stars? It simply wasn't the story for me!

Patsy says

Chinaberry is a lovely novel, as are all of James Still's works - beautifully worded and imagined. The story here is spare but important. What do you remember as real from your childhood? Are you actually recalling reality? Or are you creating a recollection based on a combination of other people's stories, your own hopes and desires, and collections of black and white photos? That's the unspoken part, hinted at in the opening quotes and the story itself, a little tale of a summer in the life of a child and a family that needs one. It's interesting that everything is told in memory, from the boy's own story of that summer and his stay at Chinaberry to his knowledge of all the other main characters. Nearly everyone is recalling stories for the boy through a soft-focus lens of love or via the telephone tree of gossip. How much is factual, and does it matter? And how reliable is the boy's memory, really? Is he making it what he wants it to be? (And is the boy Still?) Again, does it matter? There's a lot in that phrase: "I grew up; I remembered." If you read it, do not skip the Preface or Afterward. They are vital.

Karen says

A wonderful set of mysteries by James Still. A life story or the fantasy of a hurt young boy? His stay with Anson and Lurie is the perfect life a boy of thirteen might dream up to cope with his feeling of displacement in his own family to a younger sibling.

The characters are believable-except for the boy. What 13 year old would allow himself to be pampered and used as he was by Anson? He let himself be the baby in the family-the place he missed in his real family. After all, he was handpicked by Anson. And the only child. Their relationship seems unnatural-not normal. Not believable to me.

I think Still used facts from his own life to make his fantasy of "his ideal place in a family" seem real.

Rebecca says

This is one of those books whose imperfections only make it more beautiful. The nearly-proverbial novel in a briefcase. Thank you, Silas House.
