



Fate Moreland's Widow: A Novel (Story River Books)

John Lane

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On a placid Blue Ridge mountain lake on Labor Day Weekend in 1935, three locals sightseeing in an overloaded boat drown, and the cotton mill scion who owns the lake is indicted for their murders. Decades later Ben Crocker--witness to and reluctant participant in the aftermath of this long-forgotten tragedy--is drawn once more into the morally ambiguous world of mill fortunes and foothills justice.

The son of mill workers in Carlton, South Carolina, Crocker is caught between competing loyalties to his family and future. Crocker wanted more than a rough-hewn life on a factory floor, so he studied accounting at the local textile institute and was hired as bookkeeper to the owner, George McCane, a man as burdened by his familial ties as Crocker and even less prepared for the authority of his mantel.

McCane's decision to renovate the Carlton Mill and lay off families connected to the Uprising of '34, one of the largest labor strikes in U.S. history, puts Crocker in the ill-fitting position as his boss's enforcer. Days after the evictions, the surprise indictment lands McCane in a North Carolina mountain jail and sinks Crocker even deeper into the escalating tensions between mill workers and the owners.

While traversing mountain communities in McCane's defense, Crocker must also manage the forced renovation of the Carlton Mill, negotiate with labor organizers led by local hero Olin Campbell, collaborate with McCane's besotted brother, Angus, and fend off his father's and wife's skepticism of his own social aspirations. Hanging distractingly over Crocker's upended life is his burgeoning infatuation with Novie Moreland--the young widow of one of those McCane is accused of killing. Though unrequited, Crocker's relationship with Novie proves to be a beacon of hope amid the shadows of political and social machinations in the darkest chapter in his long life.

As the union retaliates and the McCane murder trial is settled, it is uncertain who the winners and losers have been in this generational clash of workers and owners, labor and capital, those tied to the land and its people and those who exploit both. When Crocker looks back from 1988 at these two crucial years in his life in the mid-1930s, he is left to wonder if he did right by himself and those closest to him. Against all better judgment, Crocker knows he must seek out Novie Moreland once more if he is ever to find closure with the past.

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