

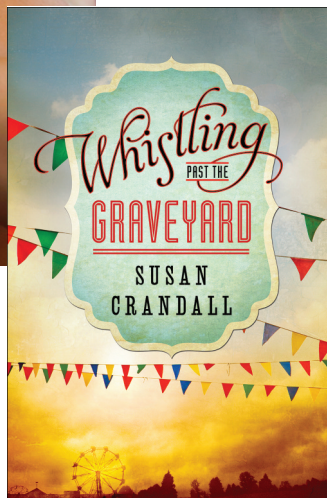


Literary Speaking

Whistling Past the Graveyard

By Susan Crandall

Reviewed by Dana Yanez-Soria, Yankton Community Library



Whistling Past the Graveyard is a great coming of age novel about Starla, a spirited nine-year-old girl. The story takes place in the south in 1963 during the tensions and trials of the Civil Rights Movement. Starla lives with her 'mean' grandma Mamie. Her mama lives in Nashville to pursue her dream of becoming a big-time country star and her daddy works on an oil rig in the Gulf, only coming home to Starla on rare occasions. Though she hasn't seen her mama since she was three, she has pleasant memories of her and dreams of their family coming back together again to live happily ever after.

Though Starla tries hard to behave for Mamie, she always seems to end up "on restriction," usually as a result of her sassy mouth and her stubbornness. Mamie is far from a nurturing guardian. She is very strict and often mentions Starla's "no-good white trash mama". Starla rarely takes this sitting down and has an endless supply of endearing spunkiness throughout the story. Told from Starla's point of view, the book contains plenty of entertaining nine-year-old analogies and Southern style vernacular.

Because the Fourth of July was Starla's absolute favorite day of the year, she was determined to be on her very best behavior so she didn't have to be put "on restriction" and miss the town's festivities. She was doing just fine at staying out of trouble, hiding in her secret tree fort until her annoying neighbor, Pricilla Panichelli (or Prissy Pants, as Starla calls her), begins skating by. Pricilla comes across the meanest bully in town, Jimmy Sellers. Starla watches from her spot in the tree, not wanting to get involved until she can take it no longer.

"As I said, I had no warm place in my own heart for Prissy Pants, but Jimmy was twelve, almost a grown

up. Him picking on her was just... wrong... I swung. His nose popped. The blood hadn't even touched his top lip when I heard Mamie yell, 'Starla Jane Claudelle!' ... Goodbye fireworks."

As Starla moped in her room on the Fourth of July, she decided she had had enough of living with Mamie. She was going to run away to find her Mama in Nashville and then send for her Daddy so they could all be together again. She takes off on foot, not knowing exactly how she will get there but determined not to go back to Mamie's where she will surely be sent off to boarding school.

Along the hot dusty road, Starla is beginning to question her choice when an old rusty pickup pulls up beside her. Inside is a kind-hearted colored woman, Eula, who offers Starla water and a ride. After she gets into the vehicle, Starla notices a white baby in a basket at her feet. This begins a memorable adventure as the three eventually make their way to Nashville, facing racism, meeting new friends, uncovering strengths they never knew they had, and forming an unbreakable relationship with each other. Though things do not always turn out as they had hoped, they each find the family they have been deprived of in one other.

I really enjoyed this book. It had a similar feel to *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd. *Whistling Past the Graveyard* plucks at your heart strings with a background of historical fiction. With plenty of humor, strength to overcome adversities and the faith to believe in love that can transcend borders, this book is a quick and entertaining read that you won't want to put down!

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