



*Loving the Dead and Gone* by Judith Turner-Yamamoto. Regal House Publishing, 2022, 235 pages.

## The Ghosts That Never Leave Us

BY JEFF MINICK

A REVIEW OF JUDITH  
TURNER-YAMAMOTO'S  
*LOVING THE DEAD  
AND GONE*

“*Everywhere I looked I saw people hurting, disappointed, weighed down with longings they couldn't name.*”

That thought belongs to Clayton, a mill worker, farmer, father, and unhappy husband in Judith Turner-Yamamoto's novel *Loving the Dead and Gone*. Clayton's observation sums up one of several themes running through this story set in Gold Ridge, North Carolina, a small, tight-knit farming community and mill town with as many secrets and hidden desires as there are people.

Though *Loving the Dead and Gone* time-travels back and forth over the twentieth century, the novel begins with the accidental death of Donald Ray Spencer in 1963, killed instantly when his car is rear-ended by another driver. He's found by Clayton, who has come to this spot by Ramsey Lake to fish, just as Donald Ray had. Clayton's discovery of the body kicks off a series of events that bring revelations to him and to others he knows.

There's Aurilla Cutter, for example, now grown old, who is Clayton's mother-in-law. For decades, her relationship with her daughter Berta Mae, Clayton's wife, has been one of turmoil and trouble, and when we first meet Aurilla we can understand why. She strikes us as a spiteful, ornery woman who's always unhappy with Berta Mae, sniping at her in public with demeaning comments and criticisms.

Yet, as we come to know Aurilla and understand her thwarted desires from long ago, we see how much the dead who visit her imagination—a man she loved, a child, two beloved friends—have affected her vision of life.

Meanwhile, the seventeen-year-old widow of Donald Ray, Darlene, grieves for her young dead husband, who has loved her with all his powers and strength. For weeks after his death, she revisits the moments they spent together, the way he smiled, the songs they shared, their lovemaking. At one point, sitting beside the lake where he died, Darlene seeks comfort by talking aloud to him as if he were there. She tells him she's wearing his work shirt from the mill, then adds: “The mornings are my worse time. Some days I don't get up until noon. I keep waiting for you to walk through the kitchen door. I just lie in bed wrapped up in that shirt.”

Eventually, Darlene turns to Clayton, also deeply

affected by Donald Ray's death, for solace as she seeks an escape from her mourning.

Turner-Yamamoto's tale extends beyond these main characters. Through Aurilla, for example, we meet her husband, Joe, and his family, bossed around by their hard-working, hard-driving mother, a clan in which tenderness seems a foreign word. Only Hank, one of the Cutter brothers, turns a sensitive face and nature to the world, and to Aurilla, which is why she falls in love with him.

My brief descriptions here don't begin to unravel the tangled relationships found in *Loving the Dead and Gone*. As I read my way into the book, I began keeping some brief notes on different characters and their place in relation to others, which helped me keep track of the bonds between these families and friends. As in real life, these characters are bound together in a complex web of blood kinfolk, friends, and acquaintances, men and women, young and old.

In addition to acting as a meditation on family and friendships, Turner-Yamamoto's novel is also a study in the hold that the dead exert over us. Donald Ray, Hank Cutter, a baby beloved by a young Aurilla, and other more minor figures drift through the lives of the living, ghosts never entirely put to rest.

Those of us who know ghosts such as these, who are haunted by the memories of loved ones gone to the grave, will find this side of *Loving the Dead and Gone* very

familiar, though we may not always agree with certain conclusions reached by the book's characters. Near the end of the novel, for instance, in a line that gives the book its title, Aurilla thinks to herself, "Loving the dead and gone was the sweetest love of all." Exchange that sweetest for bittersweet, and for many that sentiment probably comes closer to the truth.

Finally, this story of the folks of Gold Ridge reminds us that the past is with us until we ourselves die. "The past is never dead," William Faulkner wrote in *Requiem for a Nun*. "It's not even past." Like the rest of us, Aurilla, Clayton, Darlene, and all the others in this story carry the past with all its joys and sorrows every day of their lives.

Near the end of the novel, Aurilla considers her own dark and hidden traumas and regrets from her youth, giving us another insight into grief:

*"That was the true thing in all this, not that 'time heals' or 'prayer brings understanding,' like everybody said. The best you could hope for was accommodation, to know sorrow could come on you sudden, at any time, full, like at the first, and to be able to go on about your business, knowing grieving is a part of things just like getting up every morning and doing what you have to do."*

Here is a wise and well-written story that speaks to the heart of its readers. SML

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