Visiting his aging Episcopal priest father when his own home is decimated by the September 11 attacks, art conservator Mabry Kincaid meets his father's caregiver, an ambitious African-American woman, and struggles with mixed feelings about his adult daughter. By the author of Noble Norfleet. 40,000 first printing.

Reviews of the The Good Priest's Son: A Novel by Reynolds Price

Ubranzac

I am enough of a Price fan to stick with this book to the end, and I don't regret it although I felt let down. I didn't feel the story should have ended when Price stopped writing.

The strange relationship between the priest-father and son at the crux of the story was not as believable as I expect from Price. Though I disagree with a prior reviewer who found a 53-year-old character's acceptance of his daughter's lesbian relationship unbelievable. (Really? I know
70somethings who accept their grown gay kids....lots of them Episcopalians. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong champions gays and has ordained them). And we've all encountered disbelieving or sinful priests (in fiction and in life), so I bought into that character. It was the long estrangement and final divulging of secrets between the father & son that was a stretch for me.

My main problem, though, is that the protagonist Mabry is having a host of strange symptoms, and spends the entire novel putting off an appointment with his doctor to confirm a suspected MS. This character has never been told that his major symptom (frequent bouts of total blindness) could be an MS symptom, so doubt is sown that he doesn't even have the condition for which he keeps seeking a future caregiver. He never does make it to that doctor appt. to get the results of his tests. Was his blindness purely psychological? Does he actually have some other ailment, permanent or fixable? (My diagnosis, btw, is a brain tumor on the nerve connected to vision) If not, why all that business about never getting to the doctor for information and or confirmation?

That this central character trait remained unresolved irked me. Yet I enjoyed all else that Price does so well: beautiful writing; little surprises about characters that suddenly seem just what you need to make more sense of them; a south (and here, due to 9/11, a whole country) undergoing change that affect the characters; and characters with religious sensibilities (for good and ill) grappling with them.

But on balance, this isn't one of this fine writer's best works--though it may be one of his better titles.

I was sorely disappointed. Mr Price seems remarkably unfamiliar with Episcopal theology and practices--for example, when he's discussing Communion (Episcopalians believe in the Real Presence but don't confuse it with transubstantiation; they don't talk about "pouring" communion) and even the benefits of the Church Pension Fund. And where were this priest's bishop and other clergy?

More importantly, the characters' speech is about the worst I've ever read. It's stilted, phoney, and completely unrealistic. Moreover, all the characters AND the narrator sound the same. And this novel takes Political Correctness to an absurd extreme. The main character, Mabry, not only speaks in a way that's at odds with how a 53-year-old white heterosexual male would talk; he's also one of the least-interesting, in fact off-putting characters in recent fiction. The only appealing character, Audrey (misprinted as Aubrey at one point), is sketched in two dimensions.

This book seems hurriedly written. The review above is correct when it says that "the major plot elements do not coalesce into a strong, single story." That's for sure. I am not even sure that this piece, as composed, would have made a good short story; maybe.

not his best work, but still has the poignancy of a true R Price novel.

In THE GOOD PRIEST'S SON, Reynolds Price continues a theme that runs throughout his recent fiction: redemption based on some sort of repentance-- perhaps having to do with black characters--by a middle-aged white sinner, usually male, i.e., prodigal son, whose roots are in North Carolina. The character here is Mabry Kincaid, who at 53 is staring down the barrel of a gun-- he is awaiting
further tests to determine if he is in the early stages of multiple sclerosis. A restorer of old paintings, he is on a flight back to the United States from Paris when the twin towers of the World Trade Center are hit by the terrorists on September 11, 2001, and his plane is diverted to Nova Scotia. He then returns to his old home in North Carolina to visit his ailing father, a retired Episcopal priest whose live-in housekeeper is Audrey Thornton, an African American doctoral student in divinity at Duke University. She is also the mother of Marcus, a 19-year-old who has fathered at child at 17 with his cousin and has hopes of becoming a successful artist one day.

The earmarks of Price's recent fiction are all here. A middle-aged Caucasian male apparently has just discovered that African Americans might be his equal. I suppose Mr. Price is to be commended for finally writing about sympathetic black characters. Both white Southern writers and readers certainly had to get to this place although other Southern artists were way ahead of Mr. Price. Carson Mccullers who over 60 years ago created memorable, decent black people in THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER as well as William Styron in THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER come to mind, just to name two. Mabry does much soul-searching and opines frequently about the cosmos. Some of his findings: men are base; men love nobody; men are sexually promiscuous; women are better; men have no friends; black people are better than white people, all other things being equal. Perhaps America on 9/11 was being paid back in part because of slavery. The contrast between whatever Mr. Price would call the North Carolina he writes about, whether rural or small town, and the rest of America. Then there is the religious overlay. The characters are usually pretty much main-line Protestant with a quirk here or there. Mabry, who has some residual religious feelings but not too many, is mildly repentant of his past life. He had many affairs while married but did see his wife through her final illness.

Whether you care for Mr. Price's story or not, he certainly can spin one and obviously knows his territory. Remember when folks put peanuts in their Cokes and ceiling lights were often turned on with a string suspended from the bare bulb? What man hasn't checked, for instance, to make sure his pants are zipped up before he enters a room? And most of us have acquaintances we only regard as "Christmas card" friends.

Price's characters sometimes stretch credibility. Some for instances: Mabry, who describes himself as not having one "gay gene" when the Australian Man Friday for a gay attorney who most assuredly was killed in he World Trade Center, thinks Mabry is making a pass at him, apparently has been totally comfortable from day one that his daughter is lesbian and is living with another woman. He is 53 and totally okay with that? Maybe. And, of course, the author's insistence on making saints out of his black characters although he does not go quite as overboard here as in his last novel, if I remember correctly. Marcus does have a child he's not supporting but then he's only 19. (There is a strange exchange between Marcus and Mabry when each person is to tell the other one "sixty seconds' worth of some private business that eats him up" They both relate stories of sexual excess. I suppose that shows that both black men and white men are roosters and equally red-blooded, equally decadent.) Finally, without giving away the ending, I'll point out that the priest's housekeeper has only worked for him for a month.

As always Mr. Price's language is beautiful. I just wish I liked these characters more, particularly Mabry.

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A thoughtful perspective on America immediately post 911. If you enjoy Reynolds' other work, this is definitely worth reading.
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