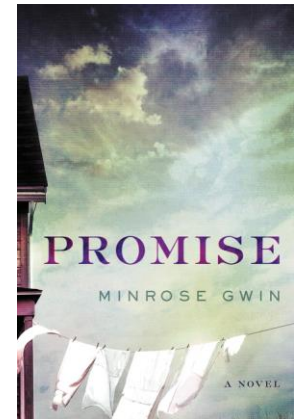


PROMISE

William Morrow

By Minrose Gwin

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Introduction

A few minutes after 9 p.m. on Palm Sunday, April 5, 1936, a massive funnel cloud flashing a giant fireball and roaring like a runaway train careened into the thriving cotton-mill town of Tupelo, Mississippi, killing more than 200 people, not counting an unknown number of black citizens, one-third of Tupelo's population, who were not included in the official casualty figures.

When the tornado hits, Dovey, a local laundress, is flung by the terrifying winds into a nearby lake. Bruised and nearly drowned, she makes her way across Tupelo to find her small family—her hardworking husband, Virgil, her clever sixteen-year-old granddaughter, Dreama, and Promise, Dreama's beautiful light-skinned three-month-old son.

Slowly navigating the broken streets of Tupelo, Dovey stops at the house of the despised McNabb family. Inside, she discovers that the tornado has spared no one, including Jo, the McNabbs' dutiful teenage daughter, who has suffered a terrible head wound. When Jo later discovers a baby in the wreckage, she is certain that she's found her baby brother, Tommy, and vows to protect him.

During the harrowing hours and days of the chaos that follows, Jo and Dovey will struggle to navigate a landscape of disaster and to battle both the demons and the history that link and haunt them. Drawing on historical events, Minrose Gwin beautifully imagines natural and human destruction in the deep South of the 1930s through the experiences of two remarkable women whose lives are indelibly connected by forces beyond their control. A story of loss, hope, despair, grit, courage, and race, *Promise* reminds us of the transformative power and promise that come from confronting our most troubled relations with one another.

Questions for Discussion

1. We live in an age of natural disasters. How does *Promise* speak to contemporary disasters and our individual and governmental responses to them? Are there lessons to be learned from the history of the Tupelo tornado and its aftermath?

2. Separated by age, race, and economic circumstance, Dovey and Jo seem on the surface as different as two women can be. What characteristics do they share? How does the disaster and ensuing trauma, both physical and emotional, intensify these shared qualities and bring Jo and Dovey to the brink of a new understanding of themselves and each other even in the face of their distinctly different histories?
 3. Promise is the name of one of the lost children in the story, but why else do you think the author chose *Promise* as the title of the book? In the case of Promise himself, why is the name ironic? What are the nuances and multiple meanings of the title throughout the story? How does the title resonate in the ending?
 4. How do the tornado and its aftermath excavate the deeper wounds of racial injustice and violence that have been embedded in this southern town's culture for generations? Where in the book do these wounds become most visibly painful to Jo? What is her response?
 5. Some incidents in *Promise* seem like magical realism, but newspaper records and oral histories of the storm indicate they are not. A dead baby girl was found in the author's grandmother's crepe myrtle bush; another child, eight years old, was blown from the African American side of town and landed with only a few scratches in the attic of a white family almost a mile away. Tupelo residents, dead and alive, dangled in branches of leafless trees. Many in the black community called "The Hill" were blown, like Dovey, into a small lake below, some being pinned under by debris, where they drowned. Given these extraordinary occurrences, what scenes in the novel still seem like magical realism, or at least products of the characters' imaginations? What are the purposes of these scenes?
 6. The motif of flying pervades the novel. What does flight, whether imaginative or actual, mean to Dovey and Jo at various points in the book? How is flying both destructive and liberating?
 7. There are several mixed-race characters in this novel. Virgil is from New Orleans interracial Creole heritage; Charlesetta's lover and Dreama's father is white. Dreama is raped by Jo's brother Son and gives birth to Promise. What was the author's purpose in creating so many mixed-race characters? How do these characters problematize the whole notion of "race"?
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8. How does the novel address the idea of motherhood? Both Dovey, who lost her mother at an early age, and Jo, whose mother is depressed and distant, must take care of children not their own. In a far more difficult situation, Dreama—just a girl herself—has a child thrust upon her through an act of sexual violence. Despite everything, each of these characters forced into “motherhood” rise to the challenge; more than that, they come to love the children in their care. What causes this to happen? And how does it happen? What does this say about the nature of love, and particularly maternal love?

 9. *Promise* is a complicated mixture of history and imagination. What is the value of history in a work of the imagination? How does fiction open up history, and history enrich fiction? What would this story be like if this were a fictional tornado in a fictional town?
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