



Ginny Gall

Charlie Smith

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A sweeping, eerily resonant epic of race and violence in the Jim Crow South: a lyrical and emotionally devastating masterpiece from Charlie Smith, whom the New York Public Library has said “may be America’s most bewitching stylist alive”

Delvin Walker is just a boy when his mother flees their home in the Red Row section of Chattanooga, accused of killing a white man. Taken in by Cornelius Oliver, proprietor of the town’s leading Negro funeral home, he discovers the art of caring for the aggrieved, the promise of transcendence in the written word, and a rare peace in a hostile world. Yet tragedy visits them near-daily, and after a series of devastating events—a lynching, a church burning—Delvin fears being accused of murdering a local white boy and leaves town.

Haunted by his mother’s disappearance, Delvin rides the rails, meets fellow travelers, falls in love, and sees an America sliding into the Great Depression. But before his hopes for life and love can be realized, he and a group of other young men are falsely charged with the rape of two white women, and shackled to a system of enslavement masquerading as justice. As he is pushed deeper into the darkness of imprisonment, his resolve to escape burns only more brightly, until in a last spasm of flight, in a white heat of terror, he is called to choose his fate.

In language both intimate and lyrical, novelist and poet Charlie Smith conjures a fresh and complex portrait of the South of the 1920s and ’30s in all its brutal humanity—and the astonishing endurance of one battered young man, his consciousness “an accumulation of breached and disordered living . . . hopes packed hard into sprung joints,” who lives past and through it all.

Ginny Gall Details

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Author : Charlie Smith

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From Reader Review Ginny Gall for online ebook

Luanne Ollivier says

3.5 Ginny Gall is the latest work from prize winning author Charlie Smith.

The title? Ginny Gall is a word coined by 1920's and 1930's blacks meaning..."a suburb of Hell". And that's where Smith takes the reader to start - to the Jim Crow south in Tennessee.

The lead character is Delvin Walker born in Chattanooga in 1913 to a prostitute. He's left alone too soon as his mother flees, accused of killing a white man. Smith takes the reader on Delvin's journey through life as he makes his way - first finding a home with the local black funeral director and then mirroring his mother as he too is accused of killing a white boy and flees Chattanooga. He rides the rails, exploring America, hoping for more, hoping for better. But it seems he can't outrun prejudice, inhumanity and injustice.

I loved Delvin's voice, his hopes and his thoughts. I wept at the fact that you could change the dates of the story and still post it under today's newspaper headlines.

Smith's prose reminded me of black strap molasses - richly coloured and glowing when the light shines through as it is poured. But also viscous and opaque when not moving. I had to put the book down a number of times and come back to it. The prose are beautiful and lyrical, but I found them overwhelming in large doses. Smith details every bit of the book, sometimes to the detriment of his protagonist and his message.

This one's going to be hard to rate - I think there's a very important message here, I think Smith's writing is beautiful and I liked the protagonist very much, but I just got bogged down in detail.

Kadhir says

good...

Nancy Reynolds says

"Ginny Gall" is the story of a black man, living in the South during the Jim Crow Era, accused of killing a white man. Just a boy, Delvin Walker and his mother flee their home in Red Row, Chattanooga. He is taken in by Cornelius Oliver, owner of the town's most prominent African-American funeral home, where he learns about grieving, compassion and religion.

This book deals realistically with a time period in US history that many current groups want to cover up, or 'whitewash'. I am a believer that those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it, so I feel works like Charlie Smith's "Ginny Gall" are more important today than they have ever been. I would recommend this book to history buffs.

(Book obtained from Goodreads)

Michelle says

★★★★ Ginny Gall: A Life in the South ~ Charlie Smith ★★★★★

“The boy was smart and he knew the story but he hadn’t been able to tell it. Like all of them he didn’t believe what was happening to him. Three hundred years of teaching, and they still didn’t get it.”

A middle-aged father of four travels across town one night to one of his best friend’s houses. He is stopped by the police and questioned. Despite the Mortuary Chief’s Seal in the window of his Volvo that marks him as a working man like them, they wonder what he is doing here. They are suspicious until . . . his friend, the lawyer, steps out of his house and asks them what, pray tell, is the matter.

A twenty year old young man has just left the mall after working 16 hours straight on his feet handling the holiday rush. He doesn’t have a car but is willing to brave the cold weather on foot. You see he has been ticketed before for riding a bike that didn’t have a bell on it. This night he is stopped once again. In fact he has been stopped nearly every night. But on this night his work ID is not enough; he receives another citation.

Ginny Gall is a slang term for the Negro suburban communities of the 1920s and 30s. It represents “the hell beyond hell, hell’s hell”.

“In each town the strict divide between the races was carefully and forcefully maintained. Place was most important. Remember your place, boy, the instructions lettered invisibly but legibly on every sign and attitude.”

Ginny Gall is the story of Delvin Walker, the last son of Capable “Cappie” Florence, a prostitute who runs off after being accused of killing a white man. He and his siblings are left behind in the town’s orphanage. Delvin’s life appears to take a turn for the better when he catches the eye of the local mortician who takes him under his wing and grooms him to take over the business. This is until one sunny day Delvin comes across two gangs of white boys fighting in the fields. Upon discovering him watching them, they take off after him. One of his friends fires off a warning shot that may have hit one of the young boys. For fear that he will be lynched, Delvin takes to the rails and begins his journey through the Jim Crow South. The atrocities that he witnesses and experiences are all too familiar ones in the year 2016. These are the travesties that still plague our nightly news programs and disturb the sleep of black mothers.

“You think somebody’s going to wake up, some bit of religion or hope or human reason or kindness is going to kick in, but then it doesn’t.”

To say that Charlie Smith has a way with words is an understatement. His prose is superbly written; his descriptions the stuff of poetry. At times I felt Smith’s narrative transported me back in time surrounded by the sounds and scents and colors of that era. At other times, I felt bogged down by the metaphors and wanted Smith to skip the details and get on with Delvin’s journey. The scenery no longer mattered to me so much as Delvin’s story did. As a representative of Black men in America both past and present, I simply had a yearning desire to see him survive, to live, to be set free.

“His spirit awakens or shifts in a new way, or an old way recalled, and a sadness cuts into him. But there is a happiness mixed with it, a sense of life going on in a world he is part of, not this world of battering and

futility but the other – pinched as it is – smelling of churned water and living things moving through the air. It's natural to him and he realizes this, the world can't really be taken from him, no matter the prison they put him in."

Rachel Harper says

The book was very slow. Felt every one of the 453 pages

Patricia says

Smith is a highly gifted author and poet. While the lengthy prose and paragraphs could have been minimized in this story, without distracting from the overall plot, there was such depth and beauty in his descriptive writing that I didn't mind the additional passages. Smith takes us on a journey into the lives of negroes living under Jim Crow from 1913-1943.

Set predominately in Chattanooga, Devlin Walker is five years old in 1918 when his mother, Cappie, is accused of murdering a white man, one of her regular customers, Mr. Miller. Cappie is a prostitute at the Emporium. She flees leaving her four children orphaned. In the orphanage, Devlin begins to learn to read from Mrs. Parker.

The children are placed in an orphanage. When Devlin is six and a half years old he goes to live with and work for Mr. Cornelius Oliver, the owner and mortician of the Constitution Funeral Home. Smith delves into the inner workings of a funeral home from preparing and repairing the corpses to dealing with grieving families members to placing the corpse in its final resting place at the cemetery. Devlin was both intrigued and scared by the ordeal. As a young child he began to ponder death, loss, life everlasting, and the spirit world.

Lynching, racism and the KKK were prevalent and blacks were constantly looking over their shoulder for their safety and mistreatment lying around many corners of life. Several of the bodies delivered to Mr. Oliver were mutilated by white racists.

When he is twelve Devlin befriends an albino boy, Winston Morgred, whom he calls Ghost and another boy called Onely. The boys were playing and hunting in the woods and accidentally fire the gun at a group of white boys. They run for their lives and Devlin skips town on a train. Devlin meets a professor Clemenus John Carmel who owns a traveling museum of negro history and Devlin joins Professor Carmel on his travels. Devlin's knowledge and curiosity is expanded during his time with Professor Carmel. Devlin meets Celia Cumberland, the daughter of a teacher and a stepfather who is a physician. Celia is in college and is toying between medicine and literature. She and Devlin are physically and intellectually attracted to each other. Devlin begins to get into minor skirmishes and trouble with the law not because he has nothing anything wrong, but rather, because he was standing up for truth, justice and equal treatment. For his first offense, which for nothing other than the color of his skin, sends him to a work farm to pay off his punishment. After release. Devlin tries to find and rejoin Professor Carmel, but on September 8, 1931 he is caught up in a terrible fight on a freight train where white and black young men and two prostitutes, Lucille Blaine and Hazel Fran, become ensnared in a fight and the women charge accusations against the eight black men of rape. Of course prejudice prevails and the eight men go to prison.

For twelve years Devlin lives in four prisons: Blue Mountain, Uniball, Columbia and Acheron. He escapes once and lives for a month before being caught. He contracts "red dog" which severely incapacitates him. Through his fevers he dreams of those he has loved and the life he lost for running as a boy: his mother, Mrs.

Parker, Mr. Oliver, the Ghost, Celia and the Professor. As the eight men face retrials Devlin pokes holes at the weak arguments by the prosecution. The white men in the courts know Devlin speaks the truth, is too smart for his own good, and is defying their authority. The eight men are never acquitted.

In 1943 Devlin finally escapes from Acheron through a tunnel and finds his way to Florida and then Atlanta where he meets another woman, Minnie Mae, whom he falls in love with. He ultimately works his way back to Chattanooga to see if he can find his mother. Mr. Oliver is dying from cancer and he learns his mother returned six years earlier to the Emporium and died there from natural causes. When Devlin goes to the Emporium he again meets Lucille Blaine who is bragging of how famous she became for falsely accusing eight black men of rape. The fate of Cappie striking Mr. Miller mirrors Devlin striking Lucille causing both mother and son to flee their fate. The ghost of Cappie haunts Devlin throughout his life.

Like the cycle of life we are brought into, we enter and leave this world alone. Devlin was a child and man searching for love, but for him, it was forever elusive and the cup of his heart never filled. No matter how hard he tried to make right in his life, the elements and circumstances were stacked against him.

"Ginny Galled, you might say-a negro name, Ginny Gall, for the hell beyond hell, hell's hell-he begins to tell himself his book."

"If they were looking. Maybe they'd...but he knew they hadn't forgot. Couldn't down here afford to neglect for too long any unaccounted-for colored man. Colored man-the rules he had to follow-was the linchpin of the whole business down here. Lynch pin."

Ron Charles says

Smith's gorgeous, harrowing novel covers a great swatch of the Jim Crow South and conjures up the largely separate, ferociously repressed world of African Americans in the early 20th century. The protagonist is Delvin, born in 1913, to a "good-time gal" in Chattanooga, Tenn. Early in the novel, his mother unintentionally kills a white man and runs for her life. Delvin is left first to the care of an orphanage and then to a kindly undertaker, from whom he learns the mechanics of death and the rhythms of grief. He's a bright boy, "a wonderanemous child," quick to read and eager to make up stories, but his primary occupation is staying alive in a society that insists black men — even boys — remain. . . .

To read the rest of this review, go to The Washington Post:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/entert...>

Chris Wellens says

Way too dark

The first half of the book is all description, a little character development, and no plot. The second half of the book has a plot, but just when you think you have hit rock bottom, it gets darker and more depressing, but that's not enough, it gets even darker and even more depressing! There are many sections of beautiful prose, but that was not enough for me.

switterbug (Betsey) says

Ginny Gall is slang for “a suburb of Hell,” which certainly applied to black people in the Jim Crow South, where you could be lynched just for being black. Delvin Walker, the main protagonist, suffered for the crime of having dark skin. He was born in the Red Row (black--we'd call it the projects now) district of Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1913, to a scrappy and fiery mother, whose crime he was also paying for. Charlie Smith's novel is more of a portrait of a time, and of a people that Delvin symbolized, castigated for breathing the same air as white people.

The author's unsentimental, frank narrative portrays the black man's burden, yes, how inhumanity is the accepted “etiquette” of the era, but also how humanity is found in some of the most unlikely places. Moreover, the author made the story specific to Delvin, the most evolved character in the story, a boy who grew to be a man, even though he was treated, by society, like an animal. It is by turns tragic, confounding, tender, rough, sharp, tangy, mournful, and uplifting. Hope, in Ginny Gall, can also be a suburb of Hell.

This wasn't just about social injustice, though. Delvin, (like other black people of the time), carved out a niche for himself, or tried to. His first benefactor, Mr. Oliver, was the well-off mortician/undertaker for the black side of town. Delvin was taken under his wing after a long stint at an orphanage. He learned the business, became part of a lively family, and also experienced life with the dead. The avuncular Oliver encouraged Delvin's self-education, and they both enjoyed reading Shakespeare and other classics together. Delvin fell in love with the written word, and aspired to be a writer.

Throughout his life, Delvin found himself having to run; some ghost or shadow of one was always chasing him (and there's an albino named Ghost, which was symbolic). Jumping on trains was a bit of an art, but it was also the only means of transportation for many of his peers. During his travels, Delvin finds first love, odd friendships, and a lot to write about. He hooks up with a learned man with a museum on wheels—essentially, a library of the black experience, and photographs of inspired or expired individuals that the “professor” felt should be learned about and remembered.

My biggest complaint—and I love a certain amount of wordiness at times—is the sheer verbosity of every scene, all the details that make up a setting. You know how certain movies provide a work of art in every frame? It works for a movie, because it presents a visual tableau for the eyes. However, in a novel, it can get bogged down; Smith never failed to enumerate every detail—whether it was every smell that was elicited, every article surrounding the setting, or the minutia of every nook and cranny. The pacing was sluggish, plodding on and absorbed by the physical features. I admit to getting weary at times, wanting to move on. This book would make a fantastic movie, as everything is laid out to see. But, in a novel, I'd like to do a little of the fill-in for myself.

At other times, the author's narrative would just break my heart. “...he carried with him for days the recall of a faint sadness...He returned to study and wonder about it, the singular occasion of reprimand and the sorrow it uncovered and the moment of silence it revealed and how this silence or space with nothing in it seemed so important.”

“The world was receding from him, leaving a space that nothing had quite filled in. Life in the end thievery's fool.”

African Americans on the Move Book Club says

Charlie Smith's new novel, *Ginny Gall*, is about a life in the South. The reader is introduced to the protagonist, Delvin Walker, at his birth on the porch where his mother is currently living. With Delvin's birth, Mr. Smith begins an in depth portrayal of Southern mores that have lasted for generations. "A certain way of doing things" that impacts both Black life and White life on a daily basis. The novel *Ginny Gall* is not for the faint of heart. There are brutal scenes that give the reader pause, if only to recover one's own humanity.

Charlie Smith is both a poet and a novelist. This dynamic combination is evident throughout the novel as long descriptive passages, filled with a plethora of figurative language, envelope and consume the often brutal action that was and is life in the South. Thesis and anti-thesis are in play when referring to both Black and White life in the South. One does not exist without the other. Exposing Delvin Walker's Black life also exposes the White life that places restrictions on other human beings simply because it can be done. The Black paradigm of survival in a segregated environment also exposes the White paradigm of annihilation in a segregated environment.

Ginny Gall is a novel to be read by anyone who is willing to face the truth about life – past and present. Charlie Smith describes what life was like during the early 20th century in America. Much has changed in metropolitan arenas; however, much has remained the same in small town conclaves. All of this is reality. Being mindful that one's perception is one's reality, we are witnesses to what life is like today. Mr. Charlie Smith has opened a door to the past that must be acknowledged by each individual reading this novel. Who is willing to accept this challenge?

Linda Hines
AAMBC Reviewer

Lyra Pherigo says

This book was a great find. I was at the Olathe library looking at the newly released books, I'm so glad I picked it up. Charlie Smith is a great writer. He is able to write poetically within a devastating story about a black man growing up in the 1930's in the South. I highly recommend it. Writers are amazing!

Jill says

We first meet Delvin Walker as a very young black boy abandoned by his mother when she was accused of killing a man while working as a prostitute on "Red Row" in Chattanooga. His education was sporadic, and he was turned away from various schools because he had no parent or guardian to vouch for him. He did learn to read, however and discovered that books were "rideable transport into habitable territory." Delvin spent some time in an orphanage and a foundlings home, but was eventually taken in by Mr. Oliver, the town's black funeral parlor owner. Oliver was a thoughtful and learned man, and they spent their evenings reading Shakespeare and other great works.

Life is good for Delvin for a while, or as good as it gets for a colored boy in the deep south in the early part

of the century. When he was about 15, he and his friend Onely got caught up in a kerfuffle with some white boys, Onely fired his gun, one of the white boys was injured and Delvin knew instantly that he wouldn't be safe anywhere. Thus began his life on the run. Though Delvin had periods of rest and safety when he landed some place with kind people who didn't care about his past, he is constantly reminded of his inferior status and the injustice brought on him by the color of his skin.

Smith's writing is characterized by long run-on sentences, sometimes paragraph length, which at times had a cinematic quality - as if the scene was filmed with one camera and no cuts. The language and vocabulary is at times inscrutable; on page one I circled two words which I would have looked up online if I had been reading the Kindle version of the book: massacree and crudesence. Neither word is found in the dictionary. Later on I encountered such words as "fribbly" and "qualmous" or "terrapinate". I don't know whether such words were meant to be part of the vernacular of the black people in the south, or words that Smith made up, or words that just sound like real words... I certainly enjoy expanding my vocabulary through reading, but some of these word choices were just odd.

Though I enjoyed the dialogue which had an authentic voice and helped to move the narrative along briskly, Smith's dense writing style can only be described as a barrage of words, ponderous and at times oppressive. About half way through the book, the sad tales of Delvin's lonely, helpless and desperate life started to wear on me, as did the page after page of walls of text - sometimes a paragraph was a page of more in length. There were also many pages of italicized text which is difficult to read and should be reserved for short passages. I never figured out why it was necessary to present so much of the text in italics.

In spite of Delvin's burdensome life, he retains a core of humanity and hope. He wanted to write books, and his travels were the source of his stories - stories that he felt needed to be told. He wanted to keep travelling and said "I feel like I'm winding string onto a ball." - a great metaphor for the gathering of life experiences.

Alison says

DNF After 257 pages I gave up. EDIT!

Becky says

Contemporary fiction book group - have to confess I didn't finish this book but abandoned it 100 pages from end because I just couldn't take it anymore. I really wanted to like this book but the overly descriptive writing, disjointed story, and run on sentences were too much to overcome. Could have been a great book as the look at the Jim Crow south, race, class, poverty, colorism, etc. provided ample material. I did like parts of this book and several sections really made me think and draw parallels to today but those could not displace the sense I was dragging myself through hoping to get to the end.

Ed Maher says

This book had enormous potential for the first 250 pages. Unfortunately, it went completely off the tracks. (No pun intended.) The author's penchant for page long sentences, endless description and stream of consciousness Mumbo Jumbo completely gutted what could have been a great story. I'm not an art critic. As

a reader I'm just a paying customer. Vociferous style over substance does not appeal to me. Mr. Smith should stick to poetry and keep the cost down.
