

In the Fall



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著者:

出版者:

出版时间:

装帧:

isbn:9780871137654

Midway through Jeffrey Lent's turbulent and lyrical first novel, a wayward son indulges a sobering reflection. "Mostly, people are cruel, given the chance," Jamie Pelham observes, not only assuaging his own disappointments but also affirming the intransigence of deed and memory--and prejudice. *In the Fall* is freighted with such moments, as a postbellum Yankee family strives to fathom its past in order to clarify its present. What they find, as Lent's tale ambles over three generations, is the danger of probing too deeply.

When 17-year-old Norman Pelham departs his father's Vermont farm to join the Union army, he can little anticipate the incredulity and scorn that his return--accompanied by his former-slave bride--will elicit. The newlyweds make a go of country life, Leah's industry wins the locals begrudging respect, and the two transact a fidelity that only rarely acknowledges their racial dissimilarities. Leah, however, who fled her native North Carolina after lashing out violently against a lifetime of abuse, believes an inescapable retribution stalks her. And so, beset with guilt and anxious to confront her own past, she briefly leaves Norman and their three children, throwing all five lives into disarray. Her desperation eventually reemerges in her youngest child, the volatile Jamie, who abandons farm life for bootlegging and rash romance. When his own

ruthlessness undoes him, it falls to his son, Foster, to uncover the lingering mystery of Leah's life and death, as well as the obstinate racism that has stalked the Pelhams.

Throughout its pages, *In the Fall* suggests that identity consists of an undeniable duality--that although we can make of ourselves what we will, we can never completely efface what made us. Foster, upon returning to the farm his father had left years before, understands that it is "a world he was not even sure he wanted part of, and yet a part of it belonged to him by the simple fact of his existence." Unlike his grandmother, though, who found only a disillusioning misery in self-discovery, or his father, who simply shirked the quest, Foster is confident of redemption. Despite a few prolonged episodes and an occasionally portentous dialogue, Jeffrey Lent's debut is admirable, a sobering and painstaking chronicle of the persistence of tragedy and the irrefutability of hope.

作者介绍:

目录:

[In the Fall 下载链接1](#)

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[In the Fall 下载链接1](#)

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