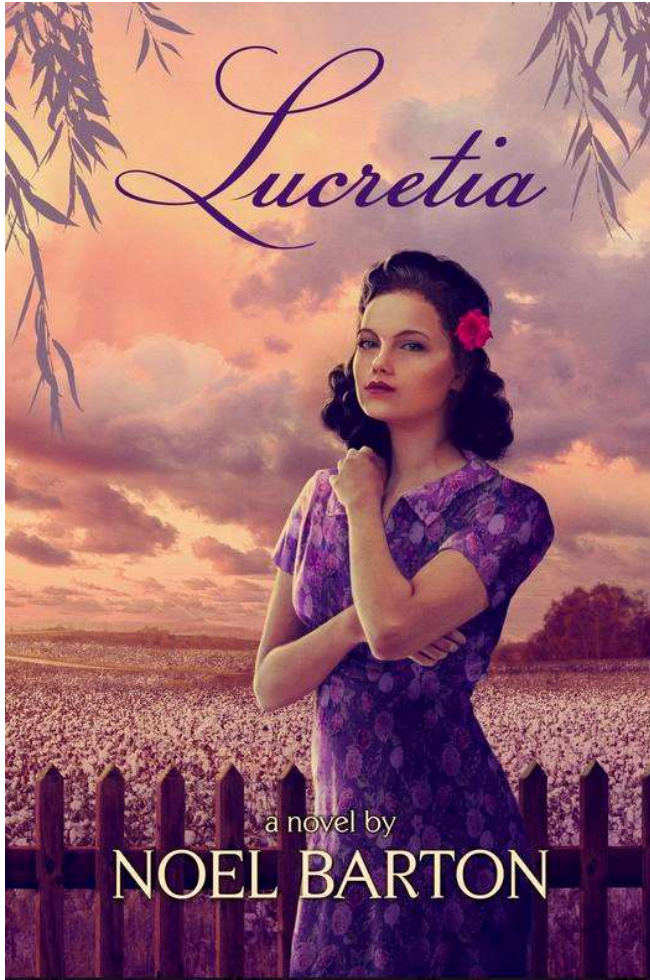


Tales in ‘Lucretia’ are eerily familiar

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“Lucretia” by Noel Barton. Bowling Green, KY: Noel Barton Author, 2022, 422 pages, \$21.99 (paperback).



“After supper, I helped with the dishes while daddy finished cleaning up,” Noel Barton writes near the beginning of “Lucretia,” her new novel. “Clad in a clean pair of overalls, he positioned his chair on the kitchen side of the door leading into the living room. Dizzy Dean’s voice blared from the old Philco radio positioned just inside the door so he could adjust the volume.”

“The St. Louis Cardinals, a favorite of most everyone in our part of the world, were hammering the Chicago Cubs – again,” she continues. “We were allowed to walk through the living room to get to our bedrooms but were never permitted to sit in there. No one else was either. I passed by our perfectly lined shoes on the way to my room. Mama didn’t care for baseball, so she got a pan of beans and sat at the table to snap them before bed. That scene was replayed nightly, with the exception of whatever else Mama did other than interact with my father or me.”

So begins another rich slice of Americana that those of us of a certain age can relate to so well. If you liked Barton’s previous books, “Watch for the Whirlwinds,” and “Another Whirlwind,”

you will absolutely love “Lucretia,” her latest contribution to the literary pantheon. Much more than a coming of age story that readers will be able to relate to on multiple levels, the celebrated author’s latest foray into our collective psyche will have you laughing, crying - but most of all reflecting on your own life and experiences.

Like that feeling we’ve all had when we realize we’ve found “the one.” To appreciate the power of Barton’s prose, consider the following scene from New Year’s Eve 1944:

“Mama always made us cinnamon rolls to eat at midnight and we had grape juice for toasting the New Year in. I followed tradition. Theodore had a stack of records lined up. But of course, ‘Auld Lang Syne’ was saved for the stroke of midnight. He said his family shot guns and banged pans too but not until after the midnight dance. We agreed to mix our traditions and do a little of both.”

“I had the pans and spoons ready. The grape juice was poured. And his shot gun was loaded. He took me in his arms for our midnight dance as soon as the record began. I was amazed how easy it was to follow his lead. He was an excellent dancer. We stopped dancing at the stroke of midnight

but remained embraced. ‘I guess I left out the most important part of the tradition,’ he whispered softly. ‘What part was that?’ I whispered back. ‘The dance partners are supposed to kiss when the clock strikes twelve.’ Our stare was never broken. ‘Well if it’s tradi...’”

“He kissed me tenderly before I finished my sentence. We forgot to bang pans, shoot the gun, or yell to the neighbors. I was lost in the music, in his arms and in his kiss. I wanted him to kiss me. I even wanted him to kiss me again. After than first one, I knew I wanted him to kiss me every night for the rest of my – our lives.”

Admit it. You were just magically transported to a comparable moment in your own life.

Honestly, I instantly saw myself and my family in many of the interactions Barton so eloquently describes in such exquisite detail. Her writing style is fluid and conversational; you feel like you are actually in the room where everything is taking place. And, unlike many works these days, there is an underlying strength and spiritual dimension to the book that will leave you feeling uplifted and encouraged by the time you make your way to the final page.

Barton, in addition to being somewhat of a local personality, is a twice-widowed mother and grandmother who is best friends with her little dog Zacchaeus. In a former life, she was a travel counselor who spent her teen years in the Bootheel of Missouri. She is very active in her church and credits God for her writing ability. Since her debut novel seven years ago, we have become friends; she still finds the best way to get in touch with me is through Facebook, as I probably spend more time there than I should.

I would be remiss if I did not reiterate the spiritual dimension that forms the architecture for “Lucretia.” I was raised in a small country Church of Christ in West Tennessee, so I could instantly identify with this aspect of her writing. My sense is that many readers will have the same empathetic connection to her writing; it’s something that stays embedded in your life regardless of where your journey takes you.

“I went forward at church the next Sunday, renewed my faith, and was baptized,” Barton explains in the twenty-seventh chapter. “Only then did I understand what Theodore was talking about when it came to the heaviness being lifted. After that day, the Bertram and Dalton families were regulars at the little church on the left between Muddy Ox and Kennett. If anyone in the congregation wondered about the timing of mine and Theodore’s wedding, Scarlett’s birth, or my growing belly it was never expressed to either my parents or us.”

“We each found our niche. Of course, Theodore’s beautiful voice was put to use. Mama fell right in where she left off in the baking department, Daddy was and has always been the ultimate handyman, and I discovered I had a way with children along with being quite handy with making crafts.”

Barton may as well had been describing my parents, grandparents, and the community where I came of age. Everything about “Lucretia” felt eerily familiar to me; visceral even. Such is her ability to capture an era and a way of life that seems to be fading into the background with each passing year. Future generations will not be able to relate to her story in the way many of us still can – but thankfully they will understand what our lives were like by reading books like “Lucretia.”

In case you haven’t figured it out yet, I loved “Lucretia.” And I think many readers would, too. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.