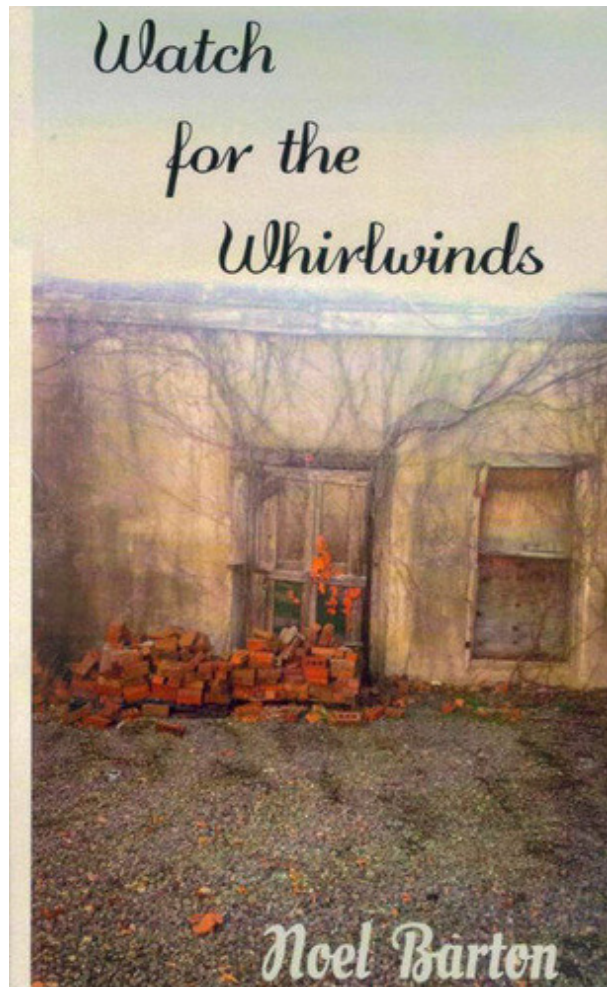


'Whirlwinds' an exceptional story

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"Watch for the Whirlwinds" by Noel Barton. San Bernardino, Calif.: CreateSpace Publishing, 2015, 272 pages, \$12.



"Whirlwinds, also called dust-devils, were common occurrences out in the hot, flat, cotton fields," Noel Barton explains in "The Whirlwind Experience," the fifth chapter of "Watch for the Whirlwinds," her debut novel. "My whirlwind didn't last long, but it cooled me off a bit and dried my sweating face. Anything that offered relief from the parching, hot sun out in the cotton field was appreciated."

"I had never been in the midst of a whirlwind before, but from then on, I made it a practice to look long and hard for one that might be headed my direction," she continues. "I was later to learn there were many kinds of whirlwinds. Some refreshed you; some almost sucked the life out of you."

I was a little hesitant about this book when Barton initially contacted me a few weeks ago. She had read some of my reviews in the Daily News, found my email address and got in touch to see if I would be interested in her new novel. As most of those who frequent the book review page know, I occasionally enjoy creative writing – especially when it comes from local authors – but on the whole I tend to prefer nonfiction. Any reluctance I had quickly melted away, however, after the

delightful conversation I had with Barton. Her sincerity and passion won me over in a matter of minutes, and I told her to send me a copy.

I am glad I did. "Watch for the Whirlwinds," although ostensibly a work of fiction, is no doubt somewhat autobiographical in that many of the anecdotes and vignettes are clearly drawn from the author's personal background. The narrative covers the full range of the human condition and has something for everyone. Although much of the storyline takes place in a bygone era, I was able to instantly relate to many of the events Barton includes in this extended coming-of-age saga in a surprisingly personal and intimate manner.

Barton, who now lives in Bowling Green, is a retired travel counselor who stays active in her church as well as the community at large. A twice-widowed mother and grandmother, she is devoted to her little dog Zacchaeus. Her motivation for writing "Watch for the Whirlwinds" is fairly straightforward: she hopes those who read the story will find comfort and solace, and perhaps some much-needed direction in coping with the challenges life deals all of us on a daily basis. Or, as Joe

Causey, a retired pastor of Providence Knob Baptist Church, puts it so eloquently in the foreword, “Her ability to weave moral lessons and scriptural truths throughout the story allows one to be entertained and educated.” My sense is that she succeeds in accomplishing what she set out to do – and in no small way.

Most readers will recognize many of the characters that populate “Watch for the Whirlwinds.” Our lives have crossed paths with individuals similar to the ones Barton introduces us to in such vivid detail. Her writing style is lucid and comfortable; it is easy to get lost in the story she effortlessly spins across the 24 chapters that comprise this exquisite work of historical fiction.

Who among us has not been touched by cancer, alcoholism, the untimely death of a family member or the anxiety of wondering how we will survive when all seems lost? And on a less intense level, who among us has not been worn down – either currently or at some point in the past – by the seemingly never-ending struggle just to fit in and be considered normal? Again, much of what Barton writes about is universal to the human experience, which is why I believe most readers would find this book hard to put down once they got past the first chapter.

Indeed, I was deeply moved by many passages in “Watch for the Whirlwinds.” Consider the following excerpt from “Meryl Finds a New Friend,” the 12th chapter:

“Trying to fit in had caused me to be quite critical of myself. I thought my eyebrows were too light and sparse and my lips were too thin. I wasn’t going to need blush, or rouge as Grandma would call it; my cheeks were rosy enough. Actually, I saw them as too rosy. Perhaps a little pressed powder would tone them down a bit. I’d have to wait until the time was right to convince her that I needed to wear make-up to fit in with the other girls.”

Later in the same chapter she follows up with this gem:

“True, I was not grossly overweight, and I carried what weight I had very well. I also carried emotional scars that made me uncomfortable and kept me on guard most of the time. My weight might not have been gross, but I was big enough to get teased. I had to stick to my plan and not let the first person get by with cutting words so that others would follow.”

You can almost feel the insecurity and awkwardness that permeates Barton’s prose as she describes what it was like to be an adolescent, and how important it was simply to find a friend you could talk to and share your world with. Her ability to convey feelings through words is uncanny; there were several points at which I had to remind myself this was a novel because, as noted previously, I found it difficult to believe there is not a great deal of the author’s life flowing out to the world on virtually every page.

Let me be clear: I absolutely loved “Watch for the Whirlwinds.” There were times I laughed out loud, and there were times I felt my eyes getting misty. There were times I wanted to reach into the book and slap one of the characters soundly across the face, and there were times when I wanted to throw the book across the room. In short, when I finished the paperback late on a Friday night, I felt as though I had been on an exhilarating yet exhausting roller-coaster ride; Barton had managed to elicit the full spectrum of possible emotional reactions.

The book is an exceptional literary achievement worthy of being adapted into a miniseries or perhaps even a major motion picture. Barton strikes a chord that will resonate with anyone who has a heart and feels for others. Needless to say, I recommend it highly.

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