



Whistling Past the Graveyard

Susan Crandall

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The summer of 1963 begins like any other for nine-year-old Starla Claudelle. Born to teenage parents in Mississippi, Starla is being raised by a strict paternal grandmother, Mamie, whose worst fear is that Starla will turn out like her mother. Starla hasn't seen her momma since she was three, but is convinced that her mother will keep her promise to take Starla and her daddy to Nashville, where her mother hopes to become a famous singer—and that one day her family will be whole and perfect.

When Starla is grounded on the Fourth of July, she sneaks out to see the parade. After getting caught, Starla's fear that Mamie will make good on her threats and send her to reform school cause her to panic and run away from home. Once out in the country, Starla is offered a ride by a black woman, Eula, who is traveling with a white baby. She happily accepts a ride, with the ultimate goal of reaching her mother in Nashville.

As the two unlikely companions make their long and sometimes dangerous journey, Starla's eyes are opened to the harsh realities of 1963 southern segregation. Through talks with Eula, reconnecting with her parents, and encountering a series of surprising misadventures, Starla learns to let go of long-held dreams and realizes family is forged from those who will sacrifice all for you, no matter if bound by blood or by the heart.

Whistling Past the Graveyard Details

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From Reader Review Whistling Past the Graveyard for online ebook

Crystal Craig says

Recommended Reading

I had high hopes for this book right from the start, and I was not disappointed. What a fantastic southern novel. The title grabbed me first and then the cover art, but the best part was the written word inside. I loved reading about young Starla and her adventures. She's quite the character. I totally recommend this book.

Diane S ? says

3.5 Let me say that I absolutely loved little nine yr. old Starla, being raised by her overly strict grandmother was by no means fair. Felt sorry for Eula, her life, her sorrows, yet she was full of love just looking for a place to land.

The south in the sixties was a rather horrible place to be a black person, though as Eula says, They is just used to it." Still reading these books are always so hard, people were just so darn cruel. A nine year old taking off on a journey to find her mother in Nashville, seems a little extreme, most kids that run away come back on their own after not getting further than the end of their street. Starla though is motivated, she is inquisitive, spunky and bold. Things do not go as she planned and both Starla and Eula confront things they never thought they would have to confront and learn a great deal about what exactly being a family means. Would have given this s solid four except for one little thing I had a hard time getting over. As inquisitive as Starla is how could she have never realized what being black in the south meant, she was far from naive. She could figure out how to handle a man being killed by Eula and what to do about it, but not that? I know a little picky, but it was still marvelous read, with some fantastic characters.

Angela M says

Parts of this story may seem a little unrealistic but it really doesn't matter because many other truths are told in this novel:

- The ugly truth of segregation, prejudice, and what it meant to be black in the south in the 1960's.
- The realistic depiction of a tough lesson learned by a 9 year old girl that in life things may not be as they seem and no matter how much we want something to be true, sometimes it just isn't.
- How love and caring can take a little girl and a grown black woman back from despair.

These are just a few of the things that rang true for me in this story of this sad and feisty young girl , Starla and Eula , the black woman she meets along her journey to find her mother in Nashville . It's sad in so many ways but yet what Starla and Eula give to each other is the hope that they can move forward from the things in the past that have hurt them.

Starla has a way with words that sometimes is funny and at other times just so descriptive of how she is feeling.

"I was working real hard at stopping words that were better off swallowed."

"A big lump of surrender swelled up in my throat, Black, slimy fear wound itself around it, choking me til my ears rang and my chest hurt."

And my favorite:

"After swallowing my stomach back to where it was supposed to be"
This was how I felt I felt when I finished this book.

Patrice Hoffman says

Let's get that I absolutely LOVE this book out of the way. Whistling Past The Graveyard is a heartwarming, endearing coming of age story about a feisty 9 year old girl who decides it's high time she flew the coop in an effort not to be sent to boarding school. It's the summer of 1963 in Cayuga Springs, the Fourth of July, and a pocket full of penny candy that puts the wheels in motion for a life-changing experience for two unsuspecting lives that intersect on an abandoned road.

Whistling Past The Graveyard is narrated by Starla who's often described by her grandmother Mamie as a girl who can't stay out of trouble. Starla's personality is as red as her hair and Mamie does not for a second allow Starla to forget that she's a stone's throw from being just like her mother. Mamie is probably one of the characters I like the least but it's probably also because I only have Starla's point of view in her assessment. Not long into Starla's jailbreak she meets Eula, a colored woman with a set of her own problems.

Susan Crandall does an excellent job at so many things in this novel such as character development, being true to the era, and all the things we love and hate about the south. Starla and Eula are an unlikely pair being their race differences as well as age differences. Starla is not afraid of anything and even when she is she doesn't back down. Eula on the other hand has been treated poorly her whole life. They both compliment and complete each other and give the other what they both need most. I love their relationship and readers will appreciate it as well. Crandall really captures what it friendship and family mean.

A lot of blurbs are comparing this novel to the bestseller The Help and I don't think that's a fair assessment. Not that this book isn't on the same level but because I find Whistling Past The Graveyard to be more true to the 60s than The Help. Crandall doesn't sacrifice the tension or danger of the 60s to make for a more sugar-coated, easier pill to swallow for the masses. There were moments I was on the edge of my seat hoping that things would be all right for our two heroines. The only similarities between the two works are the race of the narrators and the period they were written in.

I will say one last time I LOVE Whistling Past The Graveyard. It's about friendship, family, and seeing the just and unjust in life. I recommend this book to lovers of fiction and especially to those who love coming of

age stories. Whistling Past The Graveyard reaffirms that in some cases, blood isn't thicker than water.

Jennifer says

I won an ARC copy of this on Goodreads! Can't wait to find time and read this one.

The only problem with getting a ARC copy is that I don't have anyone to talk to the book about as soon as I've finished it. I have to wait until the release date and then wait for them to read it!

I really enjoyed the story about Starla and her journey with Eula and James. Susan Crandall was able to put me into their world and really feel like I was in the 60's. You can see things thru the eyes of a child who is so innocent and just starting to understand that the world isn't very nice when you leave the safety of your home.

I loved the way Starla stood up for things she believed were right, since they are things we should all stand up for.

The side characters were wonderful too. Miss Cyrene, Troy, Wallace, Lulu, Daddy, and even Mamie were portrayed in such a way that you could see them very clearly in your mind, or even know someone like them (Hopefully you don't know any one like Wallace!!).

Since I have an ARC I was sent a card that might be the cover and title of the book. I hope they keep it just the way it is. From someone who does judge a book from the cover I LOVE it! It would be a book that I would pick from the shelf because of the eye catching cover. And the title! LOVE IT!! It describes the book so well once you understand what Starla means when she Whistles past a grave yard. That's what the whole book is.

I can't wait for the release so I can talk to others about this book.

Britany says

1963, deep south Mississippi, and one feisty little 9 year old girl.

Starla Claudelle is growing up with her Mamie, her daddy working on an oil rig, and her momma left to become a singer in Nashville. Starla decides she's going to run away to reunite with her momma, so that she can finally have the happily ever after of her dreams.

Along the way she meets Eula, a black woman with a white baby. Things go from tricky to downright scary, and the story for me took a grittier, darker turn than I had anticipated. This book reminded me a little bit of To Kill a Mockingbird with the deep racial tensions of the South mixed with a strong narrator in Starla. My heart leapt out of my throat on multiple occasions over how quick Starla jumped in to rescue someone.

Wonderful southern themed book, looking forward to reading more by Ms. Crandall.

Ann says

I must say if you haven't read Whistling Past The Graveyard by Susan Crandall, you're missing something goood. Love me some Starla and Eula. The author brings her characters alive. Love this book. It's like eating a good meal at your granny's and then sitting out on the porch to watch the sun go down. Beautiful work.

Mary (BookHounds) says

MY THOUGHTS
ABSOLUTELY LOVED IT

Starla is almost 10 years old when she is put on restriction AGAIN by her grandmother, where she lives in a small town in Mississippi while her father works on an oil rig. The disappointment grows when Starla realizes that she will miss the Fourth of July parade and fireworks. Told to stay home, she sneaks off to watch them anyway. Caught by a neighbor, she is put on even more restriction and when she overhears her grandmother say she will be sent to reform school, she decides to be proactive and run away before that can happen. Starla decides that her mother who is living in Nashville and is a "famous singer" is her destination. As she is walking down the road, dying of thirst, a woman with a baby picks her up.

The woman, Eula, offers a ride in her broken down truck and Starla accepts rather than go to some horrible place her grandmother might send her. The story covers their trip to Nashville and all that they encounter. I am just going to get this out of my system now: The Secret Life of Bees, The Help, Huckleberry Finn were what came to mind while reading this one. The pair bring to light to horrible racism that still exists in the South today but was even worse in the early Sixties. As Starla witnesses the injustice that Eula faces on a daily basis, you can see the wheels turning in this bright child's mind and how she is trying to understand why things are so unfair. The fighting spirit is also strong in her as she tries to make everything right for those she cares about.

Her grandmother is not quite evil, but you can tell that her feelings about Starla's mother transfer over to how she feels about her granddaughter. I don't want to give anything away but it does have a happy ending for all involved. There are themes of child abuse, domestic violence, social mores that make no sense including how unwed mothers were treated and the fact that Starla barely escaped being known as a bastard. This would make an excellent book for a club since there is so much to discuss. This has to be one of my favorite books that I have read this year.

Robert says

In my younger days, when I had more sass in my head than I had sense, I managed to hit a few boys, and I got walloped a few times in return. Momma always said my mouth wandered off more than it stayed home, and my jaw got more exercise than a coon hound on a huntin' expedition. I had more than a little trouble stopping words that were better off swallowed, and I had my defiant face all practiced and rarin' to go faster than my granddad's John Deere tractor.

I was fixin' to visit my momma in Nashville, where I had bigger dreams than those country music singers on the radio, and I was at my wits end and back again, with an incoherent thought that was stretched further

than the truth. I had a case of the red rage somethin' mighty fierce, and I stomped my foot so hard I thought a floorboard or two was about to give way. I hated Jimmy 'cause he was the turd of the century, and I was on a one-way ticket to the reform school faster than one of them drag racers.

So, yes, for the better part of two days, you could say I had an out-of-body experience. I was ready to pack my shit and move to North Carolina or Virginia, watch NASCAR and SEC football, chip 6 of my teeth, have tea on Sundays with biscuits and visit the Baptist church, fill my mouth full of sweet tea (the only kind of tea there is despite my wife's protestations to the contrary), conduct a PowerPoint presentation on the proper use of Southern words, raise the Confederate flag, pray for Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, shove a shotgun in the back of my pickup truck and tear off toward the nearest access road, and I felt like screaming Prissy Pants in my best nine year old voice.

I need to look up See-Monkeys and Sparkle Pants (whatever the heck they are) to go along with my new Barbie House; I will be pursuing my new profession (curb girl at the drive-in); I plan on going out half-cocked and I'll be double sure; and I plan on incorporating skitterjittery, pinkie-swore, crap on a cracker, extra-smart, skeeters, bless her heart, h-e-double-hockey-sticks, squallin', caterwaulin', dumber than a box of rocks, truth be told, lick of sense, shitbird, hollered, and stinky dog doo into my vocabulary.

I often like to whistle past graveyards, or at funerals, weddings (including my own), receptions, bat mitzvahs, airports, waiting for the bus, or at bats that are about to buzz the top of my head. So I enjoyed this book something mighty fierce. And I feel as though I should send this novel to all my Massachusetts' friends and family as a Christmas present, so they can brush up on the proper way of conversatin'.

I received this book for free through NetGalley.

Cross-posted at Robert's Reads

Yasmin says

Read like many stories written by white authors which are set in the South, about the 60s pre-Civil Rights Movement, and feature a black main character. So...nothing really new shared here...very predictable. Also, the storyline was too unrealistic to me...this story was set in the Deep, Dirty South/Mississippi and it was hard to believe some of Eula's (black main character) actions. Seriously she kidnaps a white baby and harbors a white runaway...yeah right in 2013 maybe but the 60s...I ain't buying it. Additionally, there was a scene outside of a Nashville church involving Eula and a group of black men that was very stereotypical and disturbing and the author lost major points with me as it appeared she injected her own bias into the storyline. I noted that this author has written other books but I'm not sure that I will ever read any of them as Whistling turned me off not because of the writing which was decent but the storyline which was too far fetched and reminded me that most non-blacks canNOT tell stories that adequately represent who we are, how we would react or what our actions would entail.

Rebbie says

"I had to hold on to the mad so the sad didn't drown me."

9 year-old Starla Jane Claudelle is a lil cracker jack box of a kid with fire engine hair, a sassy mouth and a strong sense of justice. She doesn't yet understand the world around her in the tumultuous environment of

Mississippi in 1963, but she learns how unfair life can be when she runs away from her Mamie's house to live with her mama in Nashville.

Along the way she meets Eula, a sweet African-American woman who is wise beyond her years, but who is trying to get through life under the steely fist of an abusive husband. And under her care is a white newborn baby boy who was abandoned on the steps of a church.

This book shows the harsh reality that there were little to no choices for women, especially women of color.

The book is written from the pov of Starla only, so it was interesting to see things through her naive perspective, while having the knowledge of understanding what was really happening around Starla, Eula and baby James.

Why isn't this book a classic already? I want a sequel, btw. We need to know more about Starla's journey through life, and the torch she keeps burning in her heart for fairness and treating people right.

What a beautiful thing to write a book about.

Kim says

I loved this book! It's one of my all time favorites. It's the story of a young girl, Starla, and her road trip with a colored lady, Eula, in the early 60s before desegregation. This story and the characters were great. If you liked The Help, you will like this book. I listened on Audible and liked the narrator as well.

Mauoijenn ~ *Mouthy Jenn* ~ says

This was like a bad sitcom. I thought the writing was kind of poor and the characters were screaming for better stories. Just not for me.

Ruth Turner says

DNF

Well written, easy to read, and Southern. I should have loved this book.

But I didn't, because I didn't like any of the characters and felt no connection to them. Starla, the main character and narrator, really annoyed me. I found her irritating and objectionable.

I gave up at about two thirds because I really had no interest in how the story finished.

Disappointing and implausible.

Books says

Oh my gosh...just, wow. This book was way better than I expected it would be. If you've read and enjoyed Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* or Julie Kibler's *Calling Me Home*, you definitely want to read this gem.

It starts off a little slow but picks up speed once Starla runs away from home and meets Eula, who stole a white baby. From there on out the story takes one unexpected turn after another. The only similarities between *The Help* and this heartrending novel are the era in which the story plays out, it being in Mississippi, and racial barriers and tension between colored and white people. Everything else is completely new and focuses on the developing love and friendship between Eula, an abused colored woman who longs to have children of her own, and an almost-ten-year-old white girl, Starla, who longs for her mother and father to be together so she can have a family of her own.

"Here's the thing 'bout gif's." Eula stopped buttering her toast and looked straight at me. "A body don't know how many the good Lord tucked inside them until the time is right. I reckon a person could go a whole life and not know. That why you gotta try lots of things, many as you can...experiment."

The inseparable bonds and relationship that develops between Eula and Starla is the stuff compelling novels that leaves a hole in your heart are made of. It was so easy to relate to both these characters in different ways, and served as an eye-opener of what life must've been like in the 1960s. Both Eula and Starla are endearing characters and by the time I got to the last page, I knew I would be thinking about these two exceptional women for a long time. Both of them learned something from the other about life, love, sacrifices, friendship, hope and forgiveness. It's an unforgettable journey the reader takes alongside them, but be warned, it's one that will move you deeply. I laughed with them, I cried with them and there were many times I feared for their safety. What got to me most, though, were how they were treated by some folks, and that served as a reminder that prejudice isn't limited to color only.

The author sketches 1963 Mississippi realistically, not withholding any of the unpleasant happenings of that time. It's a story that showcases both sides of human nature and reiterates that despite the color of our skin, we all have the same needs and desires. Everyone wants to be loved, right? The ending was lovely and I was wholly satisfied with how things turned out for both these magnificently smart, strong, but oftentimes vulnerable, characters. At the heart of it, *Whistling Past the Graveyard* is testament to how we define ourselves in different settings and how love – be it from friendship, family or something more intimate - can cross any boundary. This is a highly satisfying read which I believe will find a front row seat on many bookshelves.

I received a copy of this book from the publisher via NetGalley in exchange for an honest, unbiased review.

Amy Lignor says

It is so rare in this day and age of werewolves, vampires, serial killers, etcetera, to receive a book that's beyond witty, highly intelligent and downright charming. There's a reason why books become 'classics;' it's because people simply can't stop reading the book. And because of the beauty of the story, they want to pass that book along for generations to come.

This is a classic. This is the Deep South at its finest, with characters from different backgrounds joining

together for a road trip that will literally change their lives, as well as the lucky reader who's along for the ride.

Starla Claudelle's mother left her when she was only three-years old. Lulu was a woman who wanted more than her small town and motherhood; she wanted the chance to head to Nashville, stand on the stage, and become the next American country legend. She promises Starla that one day Momma will be the best of the best and she and Daddy will join her in Nashville to live in a big house as one big happy family.

However, Starla can't count on her father. He basically lives inside himself, working on an oil rig in the Gulf where he spends most of his time away from her. The only person Starla gets to see on a daily basis is her grandmother, who is more military than cookie-maker. Grandma has a way of finding all Starla's faults and punishes her with restrictions whenever Starla even attempts to have a good time. Grandma is so sick of her that she threatens to put Starla away in a reform school, lock the door and throw away the key.

What's a girl to do? Well, you see Starla - even though she's only nine-years-old - does have some of Lulu in her. She has a sassy demeanor and a desire for a better life. And in the summer of '63, fearing the reform school, Starla finds the courage within herself to head down the road and out of town as fast as she can.

Starla wants her life to change; she wants that promise Lulu made so long ago to come to fruition, but what she finds in her escape is something even better. Eula is a black woman who's making her own way down the road with a white baby in tow. Offering Starla a ride, reality comes to the surface as the young girl with the big dreams realizes what life can hand you...and how with strength and hope she can change her fate and become her very own star.

This is one of those beautiful tales that offers the entire spectrum of sadness to elation. Each word seems to be a new lesson in life, and the characters work off each other brilliantly.

In the age of sci-fi and fantasy, this book is a breath of fresh air you'll never forget.

Margitte says

Family is forged by either blood or the heart, or if you're lucky, both.

Nine-year-old, Starla seeks solutions for her own problems, such as a threat from a mean neighbor to have her admitted to reform school, and her grandmother's strict rules that is constantly being ignored by this red-haired feisty little girl. Life is tough enough for a kid in 1963 in the American south when her mother just abandoned her and left for Nashville to get famous without her child. Starla always believed the town was just being mean to her mother, Lulu, and that the latter will make everything right for this young girl who still believe her mother cared for her.

When she decides to elope and find her mother in Nashville, a chain of events is put in motion that changes her outlook on life, family, and American history within a very short while. Racial tension and segregation becomes harsh realities in the life of this little girl who still want to win a teddy bear at a town fair. She soon learns what discipline really means and that choices have consequences she has to face up to.

I wanted to read this book for a very long time and finally got to it. It was a good experience. The theme was often overly (blatantly) emotional and the plot had too many sub-themes, such as the little baby who just fizzled out in the end. Baby James was initially an important part of the story, yet did not fit quite into the

ending, so had to be removed. Beloved Eula kills a man and nothing comes of it; a young woman leaves her baby on the church steps and nothing comes of that. Well okay then, I would love to live in that particular town ...

Nevertheless, I really enjoyed reading this story. Historical fiction, southern charm and enough love to mend all the broken hearts, even those half broken and not even aware of it yet. The racial set-up was used very well in the story although it often felt forced. Doesn't matter, the story kept me bonded to the lovable characters and their different ways of whistling past the graveyard ...

Jennifer Lane says

The Help Meets The Secret Life of Bees

...and what a glorious meeting it is. I attribute my adoration for this 1960s Southern story to its spunky, never-quit narrator Starla.

Starla is nine years old and can't seem to stay out of trouble with her grandmother Mamie, who takes care of Starla because her momma left to pursue a music career in Nashvegas and her daddy works on an oil rig.

Naturally Starla is fascinated by her departed momma, and I was furious with Mamie for hiding packages that Starla's momma sent to her. Mamie's fear of Starla turning out like her no-good momma makes her a controlling caregiver. Starla believes Mamie hates her.

Feeling stifled and afraid of being sent off to reform school, Starla forges out on her own, determined to find her "famous" momma. On the way she meets Eula, a young black woman who has appeared to kidnap a white baby. Ruh roh! Starla and Eula experience all kinds of harrowing adventures on the journey.

These two characters are absolute stars in the foggy night sky of racism and fear in Mississippi. Starla tries to deal with her "red rage" no-filter fight-for-justice episodes, but there's no reining in such an irrepressible spirit. Eula has been through absolute hell but won't let anything stop her outpouring of sweet, inspiring, maternal love. Together they're a force for good in evil times.

Starla

Eula

One of my favorite parts of the book is Starla's evolution in racial beliefs. Mamie has taught her that black people are inferior. But Starla's experiences completely contradict that lesson. Eula saves her life and inspires her to create a life worth living. Miss Cyrena offers Starla help when no one else will. We all get told certain "truths" in our upbringing that we then discover to be quite false, and this was a poignant example.

"Here's the thing 'bout gif's." Eula stopped buttering her toast and looked straight at me. "A body don't know how many the good Lord tucked inside them until the time is right. I reckon a person could go a whole life and not know. That why you gotta try lots of things, many as you can...experiment."

I love Starla's daddy. And Mamie is so complex that I'm not sure how to feel about her. But Starla and Eula

definitely steal the show.

Highly recommended! Thank you to Janelle for choosing this gem for book club.

Tania says

My daddy says that when you do somethin' to distract you from your worstest fears, it's like whistlin' past the graveyard. You know, making a racket to keep the scaredness and the ghosts away. He says that's how we get by sometimes. But it's not weak, like hidin'... It's strong. It means you're able to go on.

I absolutely adored Starla, She is such a feisty, compassionate and hot-headed little girl. She is one of my best-loved characters ever. I thought her voice was very authentic. I know a few nine year olds, and they tend to alternate between being extremely naive and wise beyond their years.

The backdrop for Whistling past the graveyard is 1963 Mississippi, so obviously racial tension and segregation plays a big part in the story. The book allows us to step into the characters shoes and feel what it's like to be invisible or hated because of the colour of your skin. But this is just the background for the real story. A story which made me nervous, happy and sad.

My initial criticism was that the characters were a bit too simplistic, in that they were either good or bad, but then I realized that I'm seeing them through the eyes of a child, and for kids everything is still very much black and white.

I highly recommend this coming of age story to anyone who enjoyed The Help and To Kill a Mockingbird

*Netgalley copy

Christina Torretta says

I stayed up well into the night to finish this one. That was after I was all tucked in and comfy but just couldn't get this out of my mind. I could have read in bed but I didn't want to get drowsy, I wanted to be able to take in every detail! It was so worth it!

This starts and I really felt for Starla. Her grandmother is a bit of a pain. And boy does she have her opinions, which she thinks are truths (of course). It is about the 1960's and of course the prejudices of that time. And Susan Crandall does an outstanding job of not having it come from just one point of view. Although the story is told in Starla's pov, we get to see how everyone treats each other from the view of a nine year old.

But what really got me is the intensity and the enormity of all the situations Starla finds herself in. Some situations are so intense that I nearly wanted to put the book down. I just didn't see how she and Eula could find a good way out of the stickiness they always find themselves in! But I just had to keep trudging on to find out what happened. I couldn't help myself... And although quite a bit of this is unnerving, much like a horror novel where your heart is beating a hundred miles per hour and you're scared when the character peeks around the corner because you just KNOW that something bad is going to happen, much like that but

even as adrenaline was being pumped through me, I just knew I had to stick it out with Starla. And her story is so worth it! For a nine year old she's sharp as a whip and so interesting!

But my favorite character was Eula. She has been through so much and keeps her Christian faith. She never talks poorly about anyone and truly is such a beautiful person. This is one of those times when you wish you could really meet this person because you just know she would help to make YOU a better person. Susan did a brilliant job of making her come alive. So much so that even with all her praying, which can sometimes get on my nerves if done in abundance, she instead made me feel like she was really special and just so grateful that she had air in her lungs and a sky to look upon!

The plot was mesmerizing. Like I said, I nearly wanted to put this down, but I just couldn't. I was whistling right along Starla and Eula! And the ending... oh the ending. It brought tears to my eyes. I will be thinking of this book for a long time to come!
