

Book Review: The Hired Man
By Sandra Dallas

Thanks to NetGalley and St. Martin's Press for this advance reader's copy, in exchange for an honest review. "The Hired Man" is scheduled for release on March 31, 2026.

This is the first book I've read by Sandra Dallas, so I have no basis for comparison. I will say that while the narrative flowed well and kept me engaged, it felt like so much more could have been done with this storyline.

It's 1937 in the Dust Bowl town of Burke, Colorado. The drought has been raging for years, and destructive dust storms labeled black blizzards are common. Onto the Kessler farm walks 24-year-old Otis Hobbs, a vagrant, and he's carrying a young boy who he rescued following a just-ended dust storm. Vagrants are "strangers" who are not welcome in Burke, but Ruth Kessler offers him a job as a hired man in exchange for room and board, so the sheriff allows Otis to stay.

That doesn't stop the townsfolk from their suspicions about, and prejudice towards Otis. These emotions reach a fever pitch when 15-year-old Martha Helen Kessler's best friend, Frankie, is found murdered. Of course, the townsfolk believe Otis is responsible, but Ruth Kessler is steadfast in her defense of the vagrant. Why?

This is where I feel an opportunity was missed. Rather than the currently written straight, chronological narrative where Ruth, in the form of one giant purge, reveals past events that influence her actions, I would have preferred to see alternating timelines that would have, little by little, given me better insight into who Ruth is. It would have enhanced character development, and made the overall narrative more interesting, in my opinion.

Martha Helen now must deal with conflicting emotions of grieving for the loss of her best friend and support for Otis. It's an interesting coming-of-age dilemma she navigates.

My other issue here is the last chapter, which jumps ahead 12 years to 1949, and in five short pages summarizes everything that transpired in everyone's lives since 1937. It's a bit of a quick wrap, and (I think) dilutes some of the more engaging narrative.

I'm not negative on "The Hired Man." It puts life in a small Dust Bowl town under the microscope and reveals society's ugly underbelly present then just as it is today. But I feel it comes up short of what it could have been.

Three stars for "The Hired Man." Worth the read.