

Book Review: Junie

By Erin Crosby Eckstine

“Junie” is Erin Crosby Eckstine’s debut novel. It wouldn’t surprise me if some schools and/or libraries ban it based on its depiction of the treatment of Black slaves just prior to the Civil War. In some ways it’s an uncomfortable read, but that doesn’t mean history and sins of the past should be swept under the rug. Some stories *need* to be told.

The narrative unfolds on the Bellereine Plantation in Alabama in 1860. Junie is a sixteen-year-old slave who, alongside her family, has spent her entire life on Bellereine cooking and cleaning, and mostly tending to the white master’s daughter, Violet McQueen. When she’s not working on the plantation, Junie spends her time reading (Violet taught her), writing poetry, and grieving over the sudden and recent death of her older sister, Minnie.

Junie is different from everyone else in her family. She is frequently described as *carefree*, and dreams of a life beyond the confines of Bellereine where she can live her own life, not tend to someone else’s.

When the wealthy Taylor family visit from New Orleans, hints at a marriage for Violet threaten to upend Junie’s life. She commits a desperate act, one that rouses Minnie’s spirit from the grave and begins to unearth dark and horrifying secrets about the McQueens and prior life on the plantation. Junie is forced to make difficult decisions between love of family and self-liberation.

There are times when the pacing slows, and several sidebar storylines tend to disturb the narrative’s main focus – or at least what I depicted as the main focus. But the character relationships are powerful. Junie’s complicated relationships with Violet and Caleb, the Taylor’s coachman, as well as her aunt, cousin, grandparents, and Minnie’s spirit, form a landmine landscape through which Junie must navigate.

As noted, there are several graphic sequences detailing the white master's treatment and punishment of the enslaved, not to mention domestic abuse against women. I often found myself becoming not just emotionally charged, but wishing someone would beat the crud out of select members of the McQueen and Taylor families.

"Junie" is a very good read filled with love and passion, racism and violence. I give it 4 out of 5 stars, and highly recommend it, despite its clear and sometimes painful depiction of the cruelty that existed in society at that time.