



The Dead House

Allen Johnson Jr. (Editor)

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Book two in the Blackwater Novels Series. Rad Fox, a boy who lives with his widowed mother on the Blackwater River, and Dr. Jordan Mason, a family friend who is visiting, discover an evil presence at the old Granger House. The twins, Will and Johnny, come to visit Linc, and Johnny gets deathly ill. In this multilayered mystery, once again Linc shows the value of his skills in the Blackwater Swamp.

The Dead House Details

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From Reader Review The Dead House for online ebook

Michael says

The first part of this book brings back memories of Mark Twain's 'Tom Sawyer' and 'Huckleberry Finn' with their adventures, fears and imagination which sometimes takes them along a wrong track.

The whole of the novel takes place during the summer holidays in the late 1930s (seemingly before the outbreak of World War II). The setting is Georgia, one of the southern states of the US with all its difficulties with race – although there is no conflict, no antagonism here between the white and the blacks.

There is a great deal of stereotyping, however. The blacks in the story are all servants of white employers or workers in low paid jobs (e.g., porters or waiters on the railway). They also speak differently, presumably indicating a lower educational level.

However, all the whites, from the young boys to the adults, all respect and are respected by the black servants, who work hard at their jobs, have stable family relationships (however without children of their own), the women and the men are the finest cooks on the whole of the continent and are, more or less, part of the family.

As in a Twain novel there is a mystery, here centred around the mysterious, uncommunicative and unpleasant Mr Granger. He's not friendly so he must be up to no good and when he disappears from town without any explanation no one thinks to investigate why, they merely aim to obliterate him from the collective memory.

It's in the perpetration of this act of erasure that the similarities with Tom and Huckleberry start to part. In Missouri the boys only act out their fantasies with adult outsiders. In Georgia the parents, other responsible adults (including a director of a railroad company) are kept in the loop. With such a lot of people knowing who, why, when and how of the eradication of Mr Granger it's a surprise the rest of the county didn't know what had really taken place.

And this is where the novel started to lose me. Indeed Mr Granger might have been evil incarnate (a slight exaggeration) but the act of elimination, when under way, doesn't take into account the new information that they gain on entering the house. Tom and Huck wouldn't have carried out their original plan in such circumstances and neither would the adults, taking into account they would have been mindful of the consequences.

Once the central adventure has been played out the novel turns to mysticism. There are references to death of close family members in the story, we have that by page two and this is not something that should be avoided in novels directed towards children. Painful as it might be death is a part of life and the sooner children understand that the easier it will be for them to cope with such events in their later lives.

However, Johnson takes a different approach and brings in the reverse to reality by suggesting, through dreams, visions and other so-called psychic phenomenon, that death isn't permanent, that the dead are 'always with us'. And added to that those with this 'gift' are told to keep it a secret as others – either those who are religious or atheistic and sceptical scientists – would consider such ideas and experiences heretical.

The ending of the novel also brings up a few interesting ideas.

Johnson is an anti-racist, I can accept that, but to create a situation where the (white) police destroy evidence, steal from the dead, distribute stolen property to poor blacks just isn't realistic in present day circumstances let alone 70 to 80 years ago in the Confederate South. Tackling racism doesn't mean it's OK to forget and distort the reality of the past. And perhaps even more so in a book directed at children. Being black in the southern (or even the northern) states of the US wasn't pleasant then and isn't for many now. To try and paint a picture which doesn't accept that reality does no one any favours.

If this novel was presented as evidence in a court of law virtually all the named characters in the story would have been charged with conspiracy, destroying evidence or being guilty of dereliction of duty in a public office and would have spent the rest of their lives in gaol.

A Goodreads First Reads winner.

Luke Harridge says

A real classic, loved the book from beginning to end.
The pages came alive, I could see and feel everything.
Such a talent of the written word.
I enjoyed the boyhood journey and intertwined mystery.
Ticked all the boxes for me.
Highly recommend.
