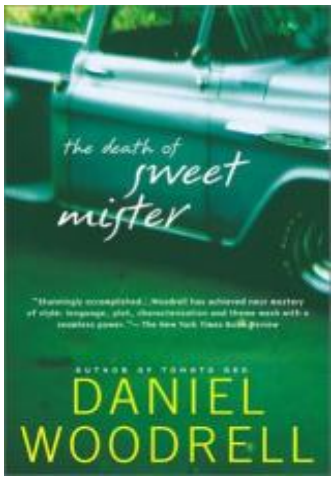
The Death of Sweet Mister

by Daniel Woodrell



About the Book

In **The Death of Sweet Mister**, award-winning author, Daniel Woodrell delivers his most powerful work to date, a darkly penetrating look at a young man's descent into the world of adults.

Shuggie Akins is a lonely, overweight thirteen-year-old who has no friends in West Table, Missouri-or anywhere else. He lives in the cemetery caretaker's house with his scantily clad, floozy mother, Glenda, who spends most days intoxicated, and his pill-popping father, Red, a drunken criminal with a lengthy record and a tendency for violence. Then along comes Jimmy Vin Pearce in his shiny green T-bird and his smart city clothes. Soon, he and Glenda are engaged in a torrid affair that will set in motion a series of events that are shocking in their unpredictability and inevitability.

In this "raw, heartbreaking, and unbelievably good" (Kansas City Star) look at a young man's descent into the world of adults, Daniel Woodrell's Shuggie Akins is perfectly drawn-and with as powerful a voice-as Huck Finn or Holden Caufield.

Discussion Guide

1.The story begins with Red ordering Shuggie to paint the vehicle, as they are suspect in it. Shuggie makes a slight mistake while in the process of spray-painting the truck, and speckles the uncovered headlights. Red unleashes an onslaught of curses. Why is this scene important? What do we learn about this family in the first chapter?

2. What might living in a graveyard symbolize? Could the Akins' live some other place than a cemetery? Would they have to change themselves to get by in, say, an urban environment?

3. Is Shuggie bitter, or disappointed with his life? Does he know what else might be out there? Is this a fatal mix for him from the beginning?

4. With a pillowcase tied to his belt, Shuggie climbs a drainpipe to make his first robbery for Red. Is Red exploiting or training Shuggie?

5. Shuggie observes, "At night Glenda liked to dress like she had somewhere to go." (p. 24) Where would Glenda like to go? Further down the page, Shuggie sees a scratch pad with different spellings of Glenda's name. How would she identify herself? What does Glenda's identity have to do with her destination?

6. Shuggie pays a lot of attention to Glenda's revealing clothing and outward displays of sexuality. He quotes Granny in regards to Glenda making a greeting in that she, "could make 'Hello there' sound so sinful you'd run off and wash your ears after hearing it, then probably come back to hear it again." (p. 31-2) At Shuggie's age, how does his mother's sexuality affect him?

7. Red doles out a few dollars for Glenda to get household items, but not enough for "no bus ticket to nowhere." (p.43) How does Red try to control those around him?

8.In the cemetery Shuggie sees the names of people who populated the area years before him and recognizes there are local places named after them. Does he have a sense of history, and his place in it? Where does Shuggie see himself in the cemetery and in the town?

9. While Shuggie is working in the cemetery some of his classmates pass by on a hike in the woods. He notices that "there were plenty in the church group who knew me, and me them, but none did wave, so me neither." (p.45) Why is Shuggie not recognized by his peers? What is the significance of this scene being set in a cemetery?

10. After Shuggie gets pinched, Jimmy Vin drives by and picks him and Glenda up in the rain. What is Jimmy looking for?

11. Jimmy and Glenda have some kind of common ground because of their past in Covington, KY. Do they have a future?

12. After delivering papers with his uncle Carl and his Granny, Shuggie is dropped off to a bloody mess. He looks around the place and unconsciously describes the state of the home and the growing relationship between Glenda and Jimmy Vin. Why does he start to clean up rather than seek assistance from the police? Does he clean up the scene in attempt to help? Is Shuggie surprised by the scene?

13. While cleaning up the accumulated mess around the home, twice Shuggie describes Glenda's attire, in particular, her short-shorts as "not too motherly." (p.168-69) Somehow Shuggie is driven to make a pass at his mother, and she doesn't quite stop him. Does Shuggie feel anything other than "heat"? He describes this incident almost vicariously. Glenda says, "They say it's wrong, and? and you just can't." (p.171) Who says this is wrong? Does Glenda say or think this is wrong? What is happening to Shuggie and Glenda here?

14. In the frog-gigging scene, Carl and Basil are wasted. Basil grabs Shuggie by the throat and attempts to choke answers from Shuggie about Jimmy Vin. Shuggie pushes Basil off, and says, "You forgettin' who my daddy is?" (Pp.186) What

does this sentence mean? From where does Shuggie's power derive?

15. In the end, Jimmy Vin never comes by the house to pick up Glenda. Shuggie feeds Glenda her drinks and hugs her. He tells her to put on a certain "long-legged green thing" that he likes her in. (p.195) Why does he ask this? What does her compliance assure? Where do Shuggie and Glenda go from here?

Author Bio

Daniel Woodrell was the author of such novels including THE MAID'S VERSION, WINTER'S BONE and THE DEATH OF SWEET MISTER, as well as the collection THE OUTLAW ALBUM. He was the recipient of the PEN West Award, and five of his novels were selected as *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year. Three of his novels have been adapted for film, including the Oscar-nominated *Winter?s Bone*. He lived in the Ozarks near the Arkansas line with his wife, Katie Estill, and died in 2025.

Critical Praise

"Stunningly accomplished?Woodrell has achieved near mastery of style: language, plot, characterization and theme mesh with a seamless power."

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