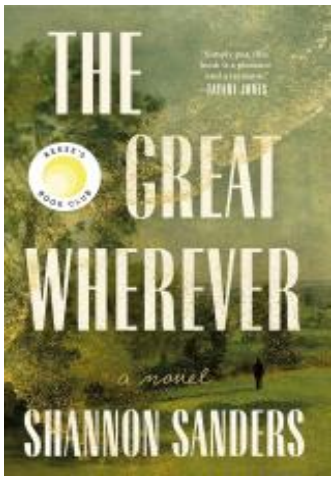
The Great Wherever

by Shannon Sanders



About the Book

The dead are relentless gossips, or at least these dead are.

An impulsive and heartbroken woman inherits her father?s share of a Tennessee farm that is rich in family secrets and occupied with busybody ghosts in this sweeping family portrait.

At 32, Aubrey Lamb is stumbling through adulthood. An underpaid gig worker in Washington, DC, she?s grieving the end of a serious relationship and the recent loss of her father. When Aubrey learns she has inherited his stake in a sizable Tennessee farm, she sees an opportunity to get out of the city --- and to erase a mounting pile of debt.

Watching her arrival with great interest are four ghosts --- Aubrey?s ancestors, who?ve staked their own claims to the farm and who never hesitate to pass judgment on the mistakes made by the living, whether romantic, financial or sartorial. As Aubrey reconnects with her living family, another story unfolds in parallel: the history of the land, beginning with its purchase by Thomas, Aubrey?s great-grandfather and one of the first Black landowners in his community. Though Thomas hopes to give his children a homestead on which they could flourish, the land proves to be a burdensome inheritance. Over the years, it turns the Lambs against one another, culminating in a catastrophic tragedy that splinters the family and echoes through the decades.

Now, as the clock ticks on a potential sale of the farm, the ghosts fear expulsion from the home they?ve made, and Aubrey must weigh the hopes and burdens of her forebears with the very real needs of her future.

An expansive family saga told with a wry and distinctly modern voice, THE GREAT WHEREVER is at once grand and intimate. It explores the ways we learn to define ourselves through and against our families, how we carry on after loss, and how the past lives on in all of us.

Discussion Guide

1. There is a long tradition of using ghost stories to explore William Faulkner?s famous dictum: ?The past is never dead. It?s not even past.? How does THE GREAT WHEREVER fit into this tradition? How does it complicate it?

2. Do you believe in ghosts? Does your family?

3. What stories does your family tell about itself? Do different members have different versions of these tales? What varies most --- details, things done, things said, feelings?

4. Many of the characters in the novel face various challenges related to love and romantic relationships. How do their struggles parallel each other and diverge?

5. Relatedly, several of the women in the novel have to make choices involving pregnancy. How do the very different contexts in which each exists (from their social milieus to the year they live in) affect their choice?

6. Do you agree with how Thomas divided the land for inheritance? Is there anything he could have done differently to mitigate the ensuing strife?

7. From Aubrey?s mushrooms to Janis? barbecue restaurant, food plays many different roles throughout the novel. What are some of these? What does food mean to the different characters?

8. We see glimpses of how several different households function, from the Lambs to the Josephs (Bellamy?s family) to the Elledges. How do they differ? Which dynamic reminds you the most of your own?

9. How does Le?Dar?s status as the narrator influence the telling of the novel? How would it be different if another family member had been narrating?

10. How much does Aubrey change throughout the novel, and in what ways? What do you think is next for her?

Author Bio

Shannon Sanders is the author of the novel THE GREAT WHEREVER and the short story collection COMPANY, which won the 2024 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prizes' Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction, was named one of the best books of 2023 by *Publishers Weekly* and *Debutiful*, and was shortlisted for the 2024 William Saroyan International Prize for Writing. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous publications, including *One Story*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* and *Electric Literature*, and has received a PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with her husband and three sons.

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