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Honoring the Homeplace

Natalie Sypolt. *If Only the Rain Would Come*. The University Press of Kentucky, 2026.

“If only the rain would come to push down the dust and wash it all clean. Or strong winds to blow it all down. A flood. A tornado. Some excuse to start again.” Natalie Sypolt’s novel brilliantly encapsulates the complex realities of small-town Appalachia and explores the difficulties many inhabitants face there. Though the novel is a work of fiction, Sypolt’s prose blurs the boundaries between made-up characters and true, real-world experiences. As a West Virginia native, it was painfully easy to see myself in many of the characters while wishing, at times, that I couldn’t relate at all.

If Only the Rain Would Come explores the complicated story of the people in Warm, West Virginia, a place that, despite its namesake, is cold and troubled. Sypolt masterfully interweaves the characters’ stories, and learning about their relationships with one another illustrates the complex nature of their livelihoods. No matter the circumstance, those in Warm are “planted right [there] in the ground while [they’re] living and when [they’re] dead.” As the narrative progresses, the reader unravels the small community perspective by perspective, while constantly hoping for each of them to escape, in any way, from an unfair world. Sypolt presents her characters through near- vignette scenes that interlace their stories, using the Crystal family as a conduit. Sam Crystal, a veteran that served in Afghanistan, has physical and emotional scars that become evident as we explore his relationship with his nephews, daughter, mistress, and the difficulties of upholding the Crystal name. Through Sam’s relationships with Hazel, his mistress, and Solomon and Andy, his nephews, we’re able to sympathize with his positionality in that we can’t choose what we’re born into, and, despite our best efforts, we can easily succumb to harsh realities. In Andy’s hopeless moments, he describes his feelings of existence: “dreams aren’t like dreams anymore . . . I carry them around with me all day, no matter how horrible, and I can’t shake the feeling that I am living inside something that is dying.” I, too, grew up at the end of a hollow, isolated aside from being surrounded by family, and hindsight has shown me how easily I could have become stuck like Andy Crystal appears to be.

Sypolt explores the magnetism that physical place can have on a person, no matter the circumstances there. Throughout the novel, some do make the decision to travel away from Warm, yet they always end

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up back in town. Specifically, Hazel's visit to the vast Cliffs of Moher centers her thoughts on Warm and her life there; she can feel Warm's pull, a heavy presence in the back of her mind and, though she feels hopeless at times, promises to "come home a better version of [herself]." It is in these little moments that we can understand the strength it takes to decide to be somewhere in every way. Hazel, here, accepts her position in life and commits to it, pitfalls and all. I, again, relate to the power a hometown can hold: even if it's not where I want to be, I still feel drawn to that gravel road, family graveyard, and small-town life I'd been accustomed to. In a way, there is a feeling of responsibility toward honoring our homeplace because it plays a role in shaping who we become.

Sypolt's novel touches on themes of hope, loss, desperation, longing, homesickness, love, hate, grief, regret, post-traumatic stress, and new beginnings. All of this, and much more, is explored in just 187 pages of prose, eliciting a roller coaster of emotion. Like so many of us, the people in Warm experience life, death, joy, and despair; yet, we hope for them not to abandon their homes but to prosper with everything they have. And, despite the difficult lives Sypolt's characters endure, the novel ends on a hopeful note in which we see characters in a refreshing light. Sam takes control of his education, Hazel establishes herself in Warm and in her relationship, Andy gains his freedom, and Solomon sets down a new path. Those in Warm cling to their small-town Appalachian roots, and, for themselves, believe in the possibility of a better future.