

Love and humor fit in small package

A Virtuous Woman

by Kaye Gibbons

Algonquin Books
\$13.95
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If anyone out there wants to spend a day curled up with a book about love and intense emotions, then *A Virtuous Woman*, by Kaye Gibbons, published by the local company Algonquin Books (1989), is the book you need.

This powerful, tightly written book packs more emotion in 158 pages than many books accomplish in 500 or more. In this, her second novel, Gibbons presents a tale of love between Ruby Pitt Woodrow Stokes and "Blinking" Jack Ernest Stokes.

Ruby comes from a well-to-do Southern family and has a bright future ahead of her. However, she turns away from this luxury and marries a migrant farmer named John Woodrow. Gibbons goes on to tell the unhappy events of Ruby's first marriage.

Following the death of Ruby's husband, she meets her next husband on the same farm. A tenant farmer, Jack Stokes is, at least on the surface, an unlikely match for Ruby. First, Jack is 20 years older than the young widow. Second, they meet in a less-than-romantic situation.

"I was hauling manure to the garden the day I came across her sitting

GLENN O'NEAL

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under the tree, and I thought how perfect a picture she'd make if she had a flower or some sewing, something womanly in her hand besides a cigarette. So I went right up to her, running on pure gall or what must've already been love, and I spoke to her on her smoking," says Jack.

This first encounter leads to a marriage that is marked by undying love and loyalty.

The strength of the book is that it focuses on the story of Jack and Ruby using different viewpoints. The author does not use much detail to describe the harsh lifestyle of tenant farming. This works to Gibbons' advantage, as it forces the reader to pay attention to the story at hand.

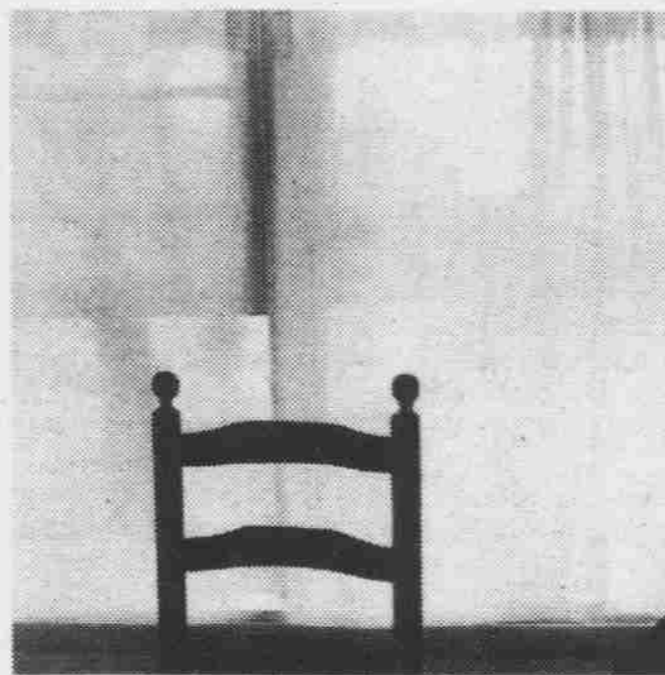
Gibbons should be commended on the way she handles the male viewpoint on love. She shows much insight in treating an otherwise difficult task.

Another strong feature of the book is its comical tone. The character of Jack manifests this comedy throughout the book and creates a balance between the intense emotion and humor.

Gibbons fails to show the reader the relationship between Ruby and her family. A little more interaction would have given the reader more insight into Ruby's decision to leave her comfortable lifestyle and marry

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL

Kaye Gibbons



A · VIRTUOUS · WOMAN

A novel by the author of
Ellen Foster

her first husband.

This is a minor complaint about an otherwise excellent work. It may or may not make the canon of works

read in English classes, but *A Virtuous Woman* will be a favorite among readers looking for a love story that goes straight for the heart.

Best Sellers

Fiction

1. *Clear and Present Danger*
Tom Clancy
2. *Pillars of the Earth*
Ken Follett
3. *California Gold*
John Jakes
4. *The Joy Luck Club*
Amy Tan
5. *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*
Allan Gurganus
6. *The Russia House*
John Le Carre
7. *Polar Star*
Martin Cruz Smith
8. *Joshua and the Children*
Joseph F. Girzone

Nonfiction

1. *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*
Robert Fulghum
2. *Among Schoolchildren*
Tracy Kidder
3. *A Brief History of Time*
Stephen W. Hawking
4. *It's Always Something*
Gilda Radner
5. *I Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*
Robert Fulghum
6. *From Beirut to Jerusalem*
Thomas L. Friedman
7. *A Woman Named Jackie*
C. David Heymann
8. *The Control of Nature*
John McPhee

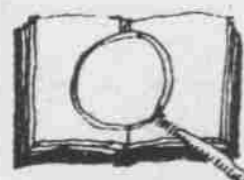
— New York Times

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'Devil-possum' leads off extraordinary day

Brighten the Corner Where You Are

by Fred Chappell

St. Martin's Press
\$15.95
●●● 1/2

The power of the mind, the skepticism of individual perception, the interplay between fantasy and reality in everyday situations... These themes are explored by Fred Chappell in his thought-provoking new novel *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*, a delightfully humorous tale with an underlying commentary on what it means to be human.

The book tells the story of Joe Robert Kirkman, a middle-aged science teacher in rural North Carolina, from the viewpoint of his son, who gives a colorful, if one-sided, account of his father's actions. Although the novel covers only one day in Kirkman's life, Chappell never lets the action lag.

To start the book, Chappell shows us Joe Robert climbing a tree to catch

SUSANNE GEORGE

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the feared "devil-possum." The next thing we know, he's fallen off a branch 40 feet in the air, but miraculously survives and makes it home in time (and in shape) to milk the cows, feed the pigs, fix an elaborate breakfast, and get ready for work. If this sounds a bit unbelievable, wait till you hear the rest of his day.

On the way to school, Joe Robert saves a girl from drowning in an overflowing creek. He finds time to drive the victim to the general store, to change into a dry pair of overalls and hiking boots, and to chat a while with Virgil, the store's owner.

When he finally breaks away from the general store, Joe Robert arrives at school (a few minutes late, no doubt). During the school day, he will comfort a grieving mother, get trapped in a basement, quit his job, and coax a talking goat off of the school's roof, among other things.

The son, whose name is never mentioned, recounts this story just as his father told it to him. The sec-

ond-hand information from a schoolboy's point of view contributes to the outrageous plotline, because the son can't distinguish between truth and fiction, and so neither can we.

Joe Robert's son, as would most young children, accepts his father's account of the day's extraordinary events without question. While the story seems quite unbelievable to us (a talking goat?), the son finds it exciting and probable. Through him, Chappell suggests that knowledge can sometimes be "the bitter enemy of wisdom." A case in point is the goat story—our knowledge that goats do not talk ruins the story's potential to be funny or just to brighten up an ordinary day.

But perhaps that's the point. Joe Robert, although he may be unbe-

lievable and weird, is infinitely more exciting than the other "normal" characters in the book. While the other teachers stress out about school board meetings and conventional worries, Joe Robert takes the laid-back, creative approach. We may not know how much of his tale is true, but we know he's having a great time telling it.

In *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*, Chappell champions craziness and fun in order to make life the best it can be. Through Joe Robert, Chappell proves that living for the day is the only way for man to make something meaningful of his life. In Joe's own words, "Man did not come to this planet merely to mark time." It is up to each individual to make his life exciting to add spice to an otherwise tasteless dish.

What The Ratings Mean

- — lame
- — just O.K.
- — workable
- — quite good
- — excellent

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