

For a variety of reasons, no reviews were prepared for the previous two books; *Let Me Tell You about a Man I Knew* by Susan Fletcher and *Songbirds* by Christi Lefteri.

The author of *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Delia Owens, is an American wildlife scientist who has worked for much of her life in Africa and has written books and articles about the animals of the Kalahari Desert and Zambia. *Where the Crawdads Sing* is her first novel, written when she was in her late 60s. The central character, Catherine Danielle Clark, nicknamed Kya, lived in the coastal marshes of North Carolina and there is more than a hint of autobiography in that Owens was also brought up in the marshes of South Georgia and her date of birth is uncertain.

The book opens with the discovery of a body at the base of a fire tower on the edge of the marshes in 1969. The deceased is Chase Andrews, who had been a talented school quarterback from the local town of Barkley Cove. The narrative then jumps back to 1952 when Kya watches her mother walk out of their shack, never to return. Soon afterwards, her brother Jodie also walks out, leaving her alone with their abusive father. The construction of the novel follows Kya from being left alone as a child until 1969, interspersed with descriptions of how the local police are looking into what they come to decide is a crime.

Kya could be described as a wild child, not because of her behaviour, since she was completely withdrawn, but because of feeling more at home in the marshes away from 'civilization'. She has one disastrous day at school, then succeeds in avoiding authority, which she perceives is trying to get her put into care. She also keeps away from people as she comes to realise that most of the citizens of Barkley Cove look down on her much as they look down on the local black people. Indeed, the major theme running through the novel is prejudice.

Kya has no friends, apart from Tate Walker and Jumpin', a black man who owns a fuel depot and store for those who run boats on the marshes. Kya and Tate meet as children and, as their friendship develops, he teaches her to read and write. Jumpin' figuratively takes her under his wing and his wife, Mabel, explains the physical changes that occur as she develops into a woman. Tate and Kya become sexually attracted to each other, but they hold off consummation since he feels she is too young. Soon afterwards, he goes to university, but fails to visit her when he had promised.

Kya has grown into a beautiful woman and had caught the attention of Chase Andrews. Her anger and disappointment with Tate lead her to take up with Chase and he convinces her that they will get married, so she allows him to sleep with her. She had always had a secret longing to be accepted by the group around Chase, but reality strikes when she reads of his engagement to one of the girls and she feels almost overwhelmed by loneliness and rejection.

During this time, Kya is constantly observing the wildlife of the marshes, which she starts to describe and paint. Her powers of observation and illustration are such that her work is accepted for publication. Chase is more interested in her body than her scientific abilities and, soon after his marriage, thinks Kya might be happy to continue where they left off. Their encounter leaves her bruised and him painfully embarrassed. She succeeds in hiding from him when she sees that he intends to get his own way and understands that the local people would always back him up if she were to complain.

Shortly afterwards, Kya visits her publisher in Greenville, travelling there by bus and returning the following day. As she goes to pick up her boat, Jumpin' tells her about what happened at the fire tower. By this time, the police have concluded that Chase was murdered, and Kya was the culprit. All

their evidence was circumstantial, but they considered the absence of a shell necklace that Chase had always worn and had been given to him by Kya was very significant. Kya was charged and held in the local jail. She was fortunate that the judge was open-minded and she was defended *pro bono* by an experienced, though retired, lawyer. Despite the obvious prejudice, the jury came to realise that there was no firm evidence of murder and that Chase had probably fallen from the tower accidentally, and she was acquitted.

The rest of the book describes how Kya comes to forgive Tate and they get married. They continue to live in the marshes, he continuing with research, she producing further books until she dies suddenly in her boat of a heart attack at the age of 64.

The group was divided about the book, some thinking it read like a first novel while others loved it. Most people were disappointed with the twist at the end, partly because it affected the reader's view of Kya.

January – *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro

February – *The Kalahari Typing School for Men* by Alexander McCall Smith

March – *The Secret Barrister* by A Barrister

April – *The Milkman* by Anna Burns

May – *The Perfect Golden Circle* by Benjamin Myers