

Kara Hemphill

Review: *The Shore* by Sara Taylor

A young girl buys chicken necks to use as crab bait and returns to her dilapidated home and abusive father to try to scrape together enough food for dinner. From there, the vibrant and often bloody world of Sara Taylor's *The Shore* only gets bigger, following several characters across centuries in interconnected short stories that serve as chapters. The numerous characters have little in common, aside from their lives being tangled together on "the Shore," a group of islands off the coast of Virginia in the Chesapeake Bay. The stories range from the 1800s to the distant future, from ordinary to downright bizarre. Yet life in the Shore remains oddly the same even through this vast scope, perhaps because the Shore is so isolated. Even in the twenty-first century, some live without electricity, and there is little evidence of the outside world anywhere in the novel. Such is the magic of *The Shore* — it suspends the reader in a world that is sometimes beautiful, sometimes unpleasant, and always, always interesting. People are born, they die, they struggle to scrape by, they harbor dark secrets, they commit atrocities and heartbreaking acts of love, all on this seemingly eternal cluster of islands.

This is a book that defies summary or, indeed, any kind of broad categorization. Every chapter has a different plot and features a different character in a different time period. Yet all these characters and events are connected in large and small ways. We see children with mysterious powers and then meet their ancestors to see how the family ended up in their farmhouse. A young girl harbors intense resentment for her abusive father, only to realize in a story set decades later that he saved her from an equally unbearable life. A pregnant woman in the future raids a long-dead character's house for medicine and books on childbirth. These are some of the most effective stories because they begin to fit together like puzzle pieces but at the same time stand solidly on their own.

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Most of the thirteen stories in *The Shore* give off a distinct Southern Gothic vibe because of their darker themes and settings. Taylor also incorporates elements of magic through a family who can control parts of the weather. Given how closely tied the characters are to the landscape of the Shore, this addition is surprisingly unsurprising. What is surprising is what she does with the two stories that take place in the distant future. These take on a post-apocalyptic bent that ends the novel on an oddly hopeful note, although not before delivering some memorably unsettling scenes from the future.

Taylor certainly doesn't hold back on the grit in this novel, and at times the sheer amount of disturbing images can be exhausting to read through. Although there is beauty in the Shore, with its lush vegetation and wild ponies, Taylor paints it mostly as a grim and even gruesome place, describing in detail the particular smell of the factories where chickens are slaughtered, the way it feels to stab someone or be held down to an open flame, and, eventually, the particular ways a widespread disease disfigures its victims. It seems the worst of humanity inhabits the Shore; the supporting cast is full of abusive husbands and fathers, rapists, drug dealers, and murderers, among others. The main characters can be equally appalling, yet their actions are understandable, and their stories are undeniably compelling. Once you're immersed in this gritty world, it's hard to put the book down.

Sara Taylor doesn't quite match the elegance and innovation of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which is mentioned on *The Shore*'s cover flap, but she writes beautifully in her way, immersing the reader fully in the lives of these characters. The stories are woven together subtly — a dead relative mentioned briefly may star in their own chapter later, a passing reference may turn out to be a major plot point — which may frustrate some but made this book

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a fun challenge for me. This is something I could read again and again, eager to find new details each time.

Naturally, some of the stories are weaker than others and don't seem to fit into the larger plot thread. "Things I Could Tell You," for example, features a couple discussing an illegitimate pregnancy, a topic that seems ordinary and even a little dull in the wake of the heightened drama of the preceding chapter. It's a sweet little love story that offers somewhat of a reprieve from the novel's primarily dark and strange material, but I was eager to get back to the almost surreal setting Taylor establishes early on. Despite these faults, once the final chapter ends, it becomes clear how each and every story led to that point. And it is satisfying to get there — although the journey isn't bad, either.