



True Believer

A daring novel of secrets, revelations, and redemption.

POLLY KIMBALL, a gentle 15-year-old farm girl, accidentally drops an oil lamp. Glass shatters; as flames ignite and engulf her drunken, passed-out father, she seizes an opportunity. “*Death comes easy*, said a voice inside her head, her body frozen until the time for doubting had passed.” Polly runs, letting the blaze consume her monstrous abuser. In Rachel Urquhart’s engrossing first novel, **The Visionist** (Little, Brown), Polly’s act sparks a story of guilt, greed, friendship, and fanatical piety in 19th-century Massachusetts. To hide them from questioners after the fire, Polly’s mother, May, takes her and her younger brother to a cloistered Shaker enclave, where congregants mistake Polly for a visionist who conveys divine revelations. The plot unfolds through the alternating perspectives of Polly, a Shaker girl named Sister Charity, and Simon Pryor, a fire inspector and general snoop for hire who professes to have “the keen senses of a bloodhound and the canniness of a scoundrel.” While Polly is an alluring mix of contradictions—at once victim and survivor, a liar with a pure heart—Simon proves even more compelling as a romantic in cynic’s clothing. When, out in “the World,” May falls victim to the cruelty of a man scheming to steal the family farm, Simon’s dormant heroism awakens. Like the Shakers, Simon and Polly seek redemption. And just as the demons who torment them are more human than spirit, so are the angels who can save them. —**KAREN HOLT**



ON THE BAYOU

In a sparkling debut, a mother and daughter take the road less traveled.

IN Queen Sugar (Pamela Dorman Books), two bulwarks of American literature—Southern fiction and the transformational journey—are given a fresh take by talented first-time novelist Natalie Baszile. Charlotte “Charley” Bordelon leaves her Los Angeles home and moves to her father’s birthplace, tiny Saint Josephine Parish, Louisiana, to claim his unlikely bequest: a neglected 800-acre sugarcane plantation. Until ten months prior, Charley acknowledges, “I thought sugar grew on the baking aisle at the supermarket. Right below the chocolate chips and the sprinkles.” But now, recently widowed, she views the land as an opportunity for a new start for herself and her daughter, Micah—an 11-year-old whose West Coast existence included meeting her wealthy grandmother for tea at the Ritz-Carlton on her birthday. Micah’s new surroundings make her wonder why everything in Saint Josephine is broken down, and why nearly everyone is black.

Like legions of other African Americans who are part of the current reverse migration leading them “down home,” Charley



BASZILE,
Oakland, 2013.

finds that the distance from her Southern roots is about more than miles and a few generations. She is perceived as an outsider by whites and blacks alike, and it turns out she needs to rebuild her farm almost entirely from scratch. Not even a mule comes with Charley’s acres—just a heap of busted equipment, a farm manager who must be coaxed from retirement, and a crazy quilt of relations and neighbors who, ironically, prove to be her salvation.

From the aromas of Community Coffee and Evangeline Maid bread to the resurging farm, “a wall of green cane leaves drinking up the afternoon light,” travels with Charley are a sensory experience, a tableau vivant that Baszile skillfully paints in a palette simultaneously subtle and bold. *Queen Sugar* is a bright and enticing reminder that, sometimes, you can go home again.

—**VIRGINIA DEBERRY & DONNA GRANT**