



Where the Crawdads Sing, by Delia Owens
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, June 2019

Delia Owens's debut novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* hit bestseller lists like a tidal wave. Since publication, it's been the darling of book groups everywhere, including one of mine. *Where the Crawdads Sings*, it seems, is the novel of the moment.

In essence, *Where the Crawdads Sing* is equal parts a coming of age story and a crime thriller. Set in Barkley Cove, a small town on the North Carolina coast, the story begins in 1969. Two boys riding their bikes out to the old fire tower discover a body lying in the swamp. Soon word spreads that it is Chase Andrews, the town's golden boy star quarterback. Could Chase have fallen from the tower? Or was he pushed?

The narrative then toggles back and forth to the early 1950s, centering on the Clark family, who live in a shack on the marsh. One hot August day, six-year-old Kya, the youngest of five siblings, watches their mother leave the shack and walk down the sandy lane. Kya is puzzled to see Ma wearing her going-out faux alligator shoes and carrying a blue train case. Quite often, Ma would disappear for a few days, to get away from her abusive husband. But never before did she wear her good shoes, and she always came back.

Jodie, Kya's next oldest sibling, is 12, and the other three kids are in their teens. Pa, who "had two settings: silence and shouting," bullied them all. One by one, the teens take off, leaving just Kya and Jodie. Then there is just Kya, so lonely that "the marsh was all the family she had."

Whenever Kya comes into town with Pa, she's shamed for being a marsh girl. The Methodist pastor's wife tells her daughter not to go near the unkempt girl. So much for Christian charity: "As tiny as it was, the village had four churches for whites. Barkley Cove served its religion hard-boiled and deep fried."

As Kya grows up, she retreats into the marsh and finds solace in it. Tate Walker, whose father owns a shrimping boat, befriends Kya and teaches her how to read. The two share a love of nature and its wild inhabitants. Kya encounters Chase Andrews in town, and, like the other girls in Barkley Cove, she's charmed by him.

Ms. Owens, the author, is a wildlife scientist, and her extensive nonfiction nature writing has won several awards. Indeed, her lush, lyrical prose describing the marsh land is the strongest part of *Where the Crawdads Sing*. The plot, however, is weakened by improbable situations which require a suspension of belief.

Given its mega popularity, it's no wonder *Where the Crawdads Sing* already has been snapped up for a screenplay. Clearly, the book is a commercial success. As to its literary merit, that's a matter of personal interpretation. This reviewer would categorize it somewhere between a vacation book and a literary gem—a good, but not exceptional, novel.