

## BOOKS

# With a Wilmington-area setting, NC author pens a remarkable debut

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Published 5:05 a.m. ET Sept. 1, 2023

New Hanover and Pender counties provide the primary backdrop for "Down Here We Come Up," the remarkable debut novel by North Carolina author Sara Johnson Allen.

The central character is Kate, a 26-year-old with a great job in the Harvard greenhouses and a boyfriend, Charlie, who's both Boston Brahmin blood and new money.

We can tell things are off with Katie, though. She only has a GED; she has no driver's license and, despite his vacation mansions on the coast of Maine, she's on the verge of breaking up with Charlie. (It probably doesn't help that he lends her out to his friends.)

Then comes a stray phone call from Kate's mom, Jackie Jessup, in North Carolina.

Jackie is a piece of work straight out of Tennessee Williams: a small-time grifter, blackmailer and occasional lady of the evening. She left Kate's credit permanently ruined by taking out credit cards in her name and was generally a neglectful mother.

Luke, Kate's twin brother, cut ties years ago when he went off to Harvard. Jackie, however, has something Kate needs.

So Kate heads down I-95, minus a license, having "borrowed" Charlie's Audi while he's off in Maine. A turnoff takes her to the family homeplace, somewhere between Burgaw and Wilmington.

It turns out Jackie is dying of some combination of liver failure and COPD. She's still running schemes, though, mostly housing undocumented migrants and helping them get jobs under the table (for a modest fee).

With Jackie is Maribel, a mysterious Mexican who cooks and tends the invalid when she's not working at the slaughterhouse. Maribel has become like a daughter to Jackie, who has Maribel living in Kate's old room.

After several tense conversations rehashing old wounds, Jackie comes to the point. She needs Kate to do her a favor.

Maribel has three children, still in Mexico. Jackie wants Kate to go down to Mexico, find the kids, then smuggle them back across the border by posing as their American mom.

This will be tricky. For one thing, Maribel's oldest is 13. For another, Kate has no U.S. passport.

But Jackie has something Kate wants. An Olympic medalist at gaming bureaucracies, she obtained the address of the daughter that Kate gave up for adoption when she was 17.

Allen, who once studied with the late Tim McLaurin ("Keeper of the Moon"), is clearly writing in the Southern grain. She has a sure sense of place and knows rural Southeastern North Carolina and the ways in which it's changed over the past few decades: the hog lagoons, the chicken houses, the growing Latin American population.

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Allen writes like a poet, and in her invocations of loss and longing, one sometimes hears distant echoes of Thomas Wolfe.

"Down Here We Come Up" isn't perfect, with maybe more subplots than Allen can handle. Yet it marks the arrival of a talent just coming into the height of her powers. Watch this writer.

## **Book review**

### **'DOWN HERE WE COME UP'**

By Sara Johnson Allen

*Black Lawrence Press, \$22.95 paperback*