



HOUSE ON THE HILL

Novelist Stephanie Powell Watts lives and limns personal versions of the American Dream and meets Sarah Jessica Parker along the way ✚ Story by Dale Smith



The story opens on a house — a grand one compared to others nearby — and its owner who left town poor almost a generation ago. He has returned now, wealthy by some mysterious means, in pursuit of a reckless dream: to recapture the heart of a woman, now married, whom he loved all those years ago.

If the plot's beginnings sound reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby*, you were paying attention in English class. But this particular house sits in *No One Is Coming to Save Us* (Ecco, 2017), the first novel of Stephanie Powell Watts, MA '98, PhD '03. F. Scott Fitzgerald himself would have been thrilled with the stellar reviews Watts has enjoyed by *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and others.

The new book isn't a *Gatsby* clone, but rather it's "in conversation" with the Jazz Age masterpiece, Watts says. The novel is set in a small town in North Carolina, a primarily black community similar to where she grew up as the first of five children in a modest household. She explores what the American Dream looks like to characters in her parents' generation and her own. One of the elders, for instance, grew up during the Jim Crow era and feels successful in owning a home in a black neighborhood and in having a job where she is respected.

Watts spent her youth "in the same Southern landscape but with different experiences." The responsibilities were similar to the earlier generation, but she saw new possibilities for her path. "Writing had always been part of my life, but it wasn't until I was senior in college that I thought I would try it out as profession," she says. "I wanted to become a professor, which would allow me the opportunity to write. I wanted to take care of myself and contribute to my family." Her father worked for decades

at one of the town's dwindling furniture-manufacturing jobs as local factories closed one after the other and flattened the economy. Whatever Watts chose to do, it had to work. "I didn't have the luxury of coming home to live with my parents."

The aspiring writer visited MU with support from the McNair Scholars program, which helps first-generation college students and those from underrepresented groups prepare for graduate school. "Of the schools I visited, Mizzou felt most encouraging and supportive, so that's where I ended up." Yet she arrived in MU's English department feeling that she lacked something.

In a mismatch of dreams and identity, she believed she was not truly a writer but merely "someone who writes things." Fortunately, the program had a strong community of writers. "And a number of professors helped me a lot," she says. Among them, Anand Prahlad, Curators' Professor of English, was a model. "He was a professor, wrote poetry and essays, and had a family. He was an African-American from similar circumstances doing what I wanted to do and doing it well." Prahlad's example proved it was possible to declare oneself a writer, first and foremost. "People need mirrors in the world," she says.

The success of *No One Is Coming to Save Us* has conferred on Watts a certain celebrity. "It's been insane," she says. In addition to taking the novel on a promotional tour, she met National Book Award-winner Charles Frazier, author of *Cold Mountain*. She also spent time with actor and book bellwether Sarah Jessica Parker, who made *No One* the inaugural pick for the American Library Association's Book Club Central. Watts was nervous meeting the fashion-forward star. "But she was wonderful. Very down-to-earth. A for-real reader. We talked books, and she reads everything!" Such luminary moments feel "surreal and strange," she says. But good.

These days, Watts at last counts herself as a bonified member of the writing profession — one who happens to teach English at Lehigh University and who lives with her husband, award-winning poet Bob Watts, PhD '03, and their son, Auden, in a house on a hill with a white picket fence in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

NO ONE IS COMING TO SAVE US

BY STEPHANIE POWELL WATTS

How might *The Great Gatsby* read if set not in the upper-crust, flapper-era East but rather in the down-and-out, post-segregation South? The debut novel by Stephanie Powell Watts offers a glimpse into the hopes, dreams and loves of such characters. Read Chapter 1 below.

The house he's building is done mostly. All that's missing now is the prettying, stain on the sprawling deck, final finishing inside. At least that's what they say. This house has been the talk around our small town. Not much happens here but the same, same: a thirteen-year-old girl waiting for the baby her mother's sorry boyfriend gave her; the husband we wanted to believe was one of the good ones found out to be the worst kind of cheater with a whole other family two towns over. The same stupid surprises, the usual sadnesses. But this thing is strange. The boy we all saw grow up came back to us slim and hungry-gaunt like a coal miner. With money. JJ Ferguson made it. The poor child who lived with his grandmother, dead for years now, the ordinary boy we all fed when he wouldn't leave at dinnertime, looking like he was waiting for somebody to ask him to play. We had no idea.

JJ was the newest resident on Brushy Mountain road. The car they say is his was parked on the long driveway most mornings until evening while JJ worked alongside the Mexican men he hired. Every town has a section where the people are rich and their lives so far from yours you almost expect them to speak another tongue. Brushy Mountain Road is that place for us. You can't help but get quiet driving on that road, like even your noisy breathing might disturb the beauty or rupture the holy calm that order and clean create. When we were young we used to love to see the houses, all lit up with their curtains and blinds open, glowing yellow like sails of ships in the black faraway on the ocean. If we went slow enough we could see the brilliant colors of their decorated rooms, their floor-to-ceiling bookcases and fine furniture, the floral designs with wallpaper you couldn't get at the regular hardware store festooning the entryways. We might even get a glimpse of one of them sipping from a mug or snuggled into a chair staring out into the darkness. Though we knew they lived among us, bought white bread and radial tires like the rest of us, we loved the proof of them. *I see him. I see him with my own eyes.* We breathed in the houses, dreamed about the ones that would have been hours of our lives had run in different directions, if we'd had different faces, if we'd made all the right choices.

SHUTTERSTOCK



When they were young Sylvia and her husband, Don, would drive the road that curled like a potato peel all the way up to the almost top to experience some of what those people had. Don pretended he didn't want to do it, *who gives a shit how them people live*, he'd say, but he was as interested as Sylvia. He was careful not to be staring if a body stood in the yard or looked out at him from the window. You can't let people know what you dream—especially if you can't get it. You knowing that they know opens a wound in you, an embarrassing naked space that you can't let just anybody witness. If the rich see a woman looking, fine. A woman can want. But nobody alive could claim to have seen longing on Don's face. You got to be immune, Mr. Antibiotic or else you hurt all the time.

Why they looked at those places, neither of them could exactly say, since when they came down from the mountain to their own dark little house that they'd fought hard to have and harder to keep, their space felt smaller, meeker, and as tear-filled as a broken promise. Habit is one explanation. Sundays, when they were apt to get lazy and the last thing you need is boredom, a slowed mind, the leisure to think about the man you love-hate, the face that won't stop looking tired no matter how much you sleep, that thing you do, whatever it is—the driving, the crying, the sinning—calls to you, begs to you to keep getting it done, keep at it, don't think, keep at it.

But habit is only part of it. The sting of not having or not having enough bores a pain black hole that sucks all the other of life's injuries into one sharp stinging gap that you don't need a scientist

even if they could afford to buy there. At least we didn't have to believe that we'd done everything wrong and were not the ones that God had chosen.

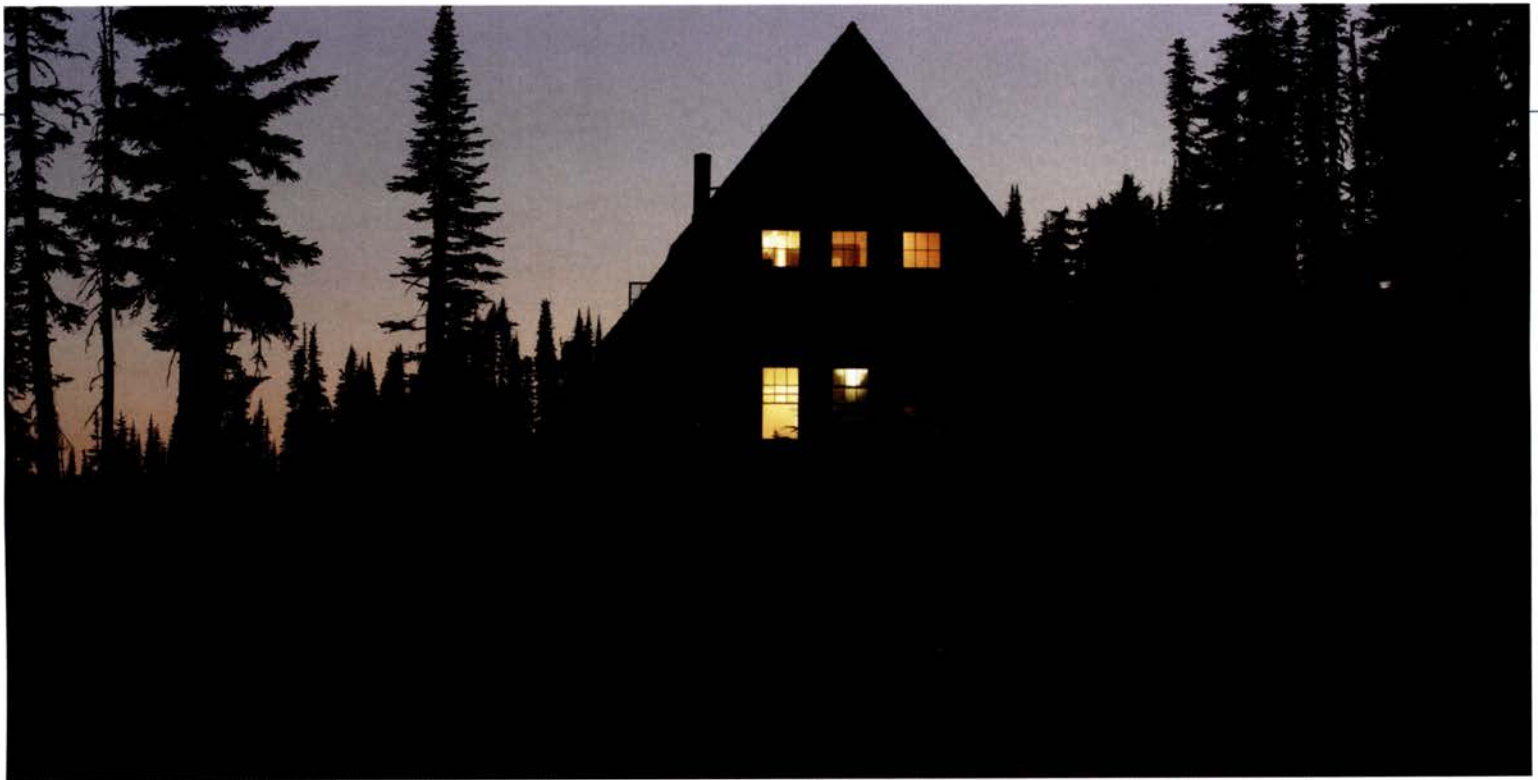
So much has changed since we were just starting out. The furniture plants that built the town are all but empty. The jobs on the line turning yellow pinewood into the tables and beds for the world are mostly gone. Without the factories there is little work to do. What a difference a few years can make. The jobs that everybody knew as the last resort or the safety net are the jobs nobody can get anymore. Used to be at 3:30 p.m. the roads from Bernhardt, Hammary, Broyhill, and Bassett were hot with cars, bumper to bumper, the convenience stores full of mostly men, but women too with cold ones (Coke or stronger) in one hand, Nabs or Little Debbie cakes in the other for the ride home. These days, go anywhere you please at 3:30 with no trouble. Here's a math problem for you. How many casinos does it take to make a town? Are you calculating? Got it? No, sorry that's a trick question. No number of casinos make a town. But if you want a stopover, a place to throw your balled-up trash out the window as you float by in your car, you just need one good casino. Don't get me wrong, we love a casino and wish for one like the last vial of antidote. We believe despite all experience to the contrary in easy money and our own fortunes changing in an instant like the magician's card from the sleeve. If one quarter came miraculously from behind the ear, we would milk that ear for days for the rent money. We believe. We hope for the town to morph into an all-resort slick tourist trap, looking like no real person had ever lived here. We are full of the fevered hope of the newly come

When that house was done, Sylvia knew JJ would be knocking at her door. Years ago that boy had spent too much time in her kitchen, on her back porch and staring at her beautiful child Ava. That JJ had loved Ava was obvious.

to remind you may be bottomless. Returning to their house means returning from those mountain drives to their sagging furniture that was old when they got it twenty years before and to a yard that looked even smaller than they remembered. That beautiful house is just a street away, but as out of reach as the moon. But that house-pain is just one lack, and everybody knows one pain is far better than a hundred. That is the mercy. That is the relief—the ache of one singular pain. It was hard not to believe that we, the black people in town in dog trots and shotgun houses at the bottom of the mountain, houses stuck in the sides of hills scattered like chicken feed, weren't the ugly children. What a relief that in our hearts we knew that no coloreds, no Negroes, no blacks, were welcome,

to Jesus. We can reinvent. We can survive. At least some of us think so. What choice do we have?

Still the rich have moved from the center of town and the near hills to other places in the county. Their homes are estates where their windows look onto the rolling acres of kings. The houses, the once mansions in town that they and their kind left behind, belong to the flippers to turn into cramped and oddly configured apartments or raze altogether. The message was clear as day, the richest person doesn't live in our midst anymore and what the rich had now, we couldn't ever see it for ourselves. Even so, even though we know all that, Brushy Mountain Road loomed in our thinking, in our childhood imaginings. You think you forget those dreams? You get old, but



the dreams remain, spry and vigorous. Swat them and they come back like gnats, like plague. You can't kill them. They can't die.

The first thing JJ did on that mountain was cut out a whole new road up to his house. Heavy machines of industry, Kubotas and Deeres, used to make the path dotted the hills for weeks, like kids' toys abandoned in the weeds. Men in town speculated about the tons of gravel and the weight of red clay they had to shift from one place to another to level the hills. The women didn't care about the road. They knew from their own yards how difficult it was to make a way to get from there to here. They'd dug their own paths, moved their own dirt and rocks in the stubborn Carolina soil. What excited the women was the river rock foundation, the big beautiful windows, the walls rising up like raptured dead.

Most days, JJ would be up there himself, walking around the site, talking to the Mexican men or working hard himself judging by the reports of his sweat-soaked clothes, his close-cropped hair grayed with sawdust. Living in a small town means knowing the news, the broad strokes as well as the lurid minutiae of your neighbor's life. Your dirty kitchen, cancer treatments, drugged-out child all on the sandwich board of your back, swirled around the body with a stink you could not outrun. JJ was from another small town and did not have nearby family. Few people knew JJ to give out too many details. We are not surprised. We knew too little about him when he lived in Pinewood as a young man. But soon he would show his face. When that house was done, Sylvia knew JJ would be knocking at her door. Years ago that boy had spent too much time in her kitchen, on her back porch and staring at her beautiful child Ava. That JJ had loved Ava was obvious.

That Sylvia loved JJ too, like a son, like Devon, her own son, was just as clear. Her son was Devon pronounced like Levon from the Elton John song, though Sylvia was embarrassed to admit that fact to anybody. Devon was her firstborn baby, the baby she wasn't supposed to have. She never had any romance about being a mother and knew that having a baby was easy if your body was willing. Girls, hardly older than the ones Sylvia passed at the school bus stop at the end of the road every morning, became mothers. But Sylvia's body had been unwilling until Devon came. She was almost thirty, old in those days and sure that her baby days were long past. It wasn't that Sylvia loved Devon any more than her daughter, Ava, but Devon was the child that changed her status, the child that made her look at the ordinary world as a big and dangerous paradise. JJ was so like her Devon: both calm boys, funny children with soft voices, with the same warm puddled eyes like they'd been caught crying and they were trying to recover.

Almost a generation had passed, a long time any way you look at it, but Sylvia knew that the feelings were just there under the pancake make-up of the surface. JJ felt them too, how could he not? He had left them, but he was back. That counted. Of course it counted.

They used to say if you love something set it free. Don't you believe it! Love means never letting anything go, never seeing it stride on long confident legs away from you. You think love leaves? You think you are ever free? Then you are a child or a fool. Flee in the dark, spend a lifetime away, never say its name, never say its name, but one day, or if you are very unlucky, every day, it will whisper yours. And, you know you want to hear your name. Say it, love. Please say it. **M**

Books by Stephanie Powell Watts

*We Are Taking
Only What We
Need* (BkMk
Press, 2011)

*No One Is
Coming to
Save Us*
(Ecco, 2017)

Awards
Pushcart
Prize, 2008

Ernest J.
Gaines Award
for Literary
Excellence,
2012

Whiting
Award, 2013