



## The Night Blooming Cereus and other stories

By Harold O. Wilson, 2008

Harold Wilson's "The Night Blooming Cereus" and other stories is a hot, southern collection of tales drenched in character. The collection is divided into two sections: the title story, which is a series of stories that link together like a rusty chain, and other stories which stand independently from the first arc. In "The Night Blooming Cereus," Wilson's prose reeks of Faulkner and O'Connor – not a bad thing, mind you, and the narrative plays back and forth between the past, the present, and not-so-distance past like music from a far off room. Wilson's prose is tense, often alternating tight and expansive lines to generate a languid rolling rhythm, not unlike the blues:

"The father, his head swaying and his eyes rolling, approached his son with the second snake and like a deranged waiter tendering a tray of canapés, offered it. Closing his Bible and tucking it under his arm the boy took the snake and continued to preach."

No one is safe in Wilson's stories, not the preacher, not the spurned lover, the lowly criminal. All suffer emotional and physical traumas. Wilson uses a variety of techniques to weave the stories. Epistles and flashbacks give the interlocking stories the feel of a novel. Visually, the stories play out like an Altman movie, the lens pulling back on the history of these people, bound by rape, violence, and the earth itself.

The narratives aren't limited to Southern gothic family dramas. In "Tea at Four" the main character is challenged to seduce a handsome well-connected doctor at the wife's behest and expense, an engagement that satisfies both women. In "Caesar's Tomb", the stony New England winter is as much of a character as the local minister.

That is Wilson's gift: The ability to bind the characters to their setting, which transports readers into the story narrative as if it were a pair of old driving gloves, something your grandparents might have owned, something that is both soft and tough at the same time.