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REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

SYCAMORE DRIVE

Charles Michael Casper

Old Stone Press (190 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

A debut novel focuses on a scandal in a mid-20th-century American town.

Casper's tale opens on an innocent-enough scene. In 1955 ("The Cold War was at its height, nuclear threats and fallout shelters were a reality of life, and Communism was the devil that leaped from the pages of every news outlet"), 28-year-old Norman Hudson is watching some children on Sycamore Drive as they examine a dead possum in the road. Thirteen-year-old Sarah McMillan, comes over and greets him. This is unusual for Norman, who's considered odd by the people in his Riverport, Illinois, neighborhood, and it's discouraged by his mother, Delores. She has a long, bad history with Roman Catholics and hates the McMillans for their faith (and for the sheer number of Sarah's siblings). Sarah's father, Dan, is the majority owner of the Radiance Church Goods Store, which does a brisk business with all of the local houses of worship ("The more knickknacks, the greater the piety"). In the novel's early pages, the McMillans are having a special guest for supper: Monsignor Donnelly, pastor of the family's church. All seems normal, the very picture of suburban life in Eisenhower America, but Casper has a much darker story to tell. Gradually, a tale of sexual predation combines with "the strange but curious amalgamation of the workings of the Catholic religion" to create a narrative that will be familiar to readers who have watched the scandal-rocked church of the last few decades. The author writes with an unaffected simplicity, and although his characters tend to be either arch or flat, his portrayal of the atmosphere of '50s Catholicism is stark. Casper neatly evokes the ingrained societal trust placed in a church that was often busy hiding abuses and shuttling predators from parish to parish rather than expelling them and handing them over to the police. Readers will feel the conflicting emotions effectively.

An unadorned but cumulatively powerful look at the previous generation's Catholicism.

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