



**THE VAIN CONVERSATION**

by [Anthony Grooms](https://www.kirkusreviews.com/search/?q=Anthony%20Grooms;t=author)

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**KIRKUS REVIEW**

A real-life racially motivated mass killing from 1946 is boldly and deeply reimagined—as are its long-term reverberations.

It is the summer of 1946, and 10-year-old Lonnie Henson, a young white boy living in the rural outskirts of Bethany, Georgia, is picking blackberries toward twilight when he stumbles upon a horrific sight: a crowd of white men and women, some of whom he recognizes, gathered together to shoot and bludgeon two African-American couples to death; one of the dead he recognizes as Bertrand Johnson, a family friend who’d found communion with Lonnie’s late father, an ex-GI traumatized by what he’d witnessed during World War II. From that jolting opening, Grooms (*Trouble No More*, 1996, etc.) gradually weaves his narrative back and forth to the days, months, and years preceding and following the murders, which are drawn from a real-life lynching of two couples that same year in the same region. (No one was ever arrested or prosecuted.) With dexterity and compassion, Grooms takes the full measure of his characters, white and black, including Lonnie’s parents and great aunt Grace; Bertrand’s outspoken wife, Luellen, and stoic mother, Milledge; Maribelle Crookshank, owner of the local diner and town gossip; Vernon Venable, the wealthy white businessman who sets the ugly events in motion by attacking the wife of Jimmy Lee, one of the four victims; and Venable’s friend Noland Jacks, who is one of those Lonnie remembers most in the lynch mob even after he’s grown up and left to join the Navy, forever agonized and conscience-stricken by what he’s seen. Grooms’ novel presents racism as a self-perpetuating monster piling large and small atrocities atop one another. No one is immune from those atrocities or their consequences, the book strongly asserts—though it also implies that redemption, at whatever cost, may be accessible to those who, like Lonnie, feel deeply enough to escape their grim legacy.

That Grooms’ incisive, gripping, and empathetic novel dares to probe beneath the humiliations, customs, and fears that sustain injustice implies that our seemingly eternal conversation on race, to which the title refers, may not be as vain as it often seems.

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