



Join our mailing list!

Join

archipelago books

[DONATE NOW](#)
[ABOUT](#)
[CATALOG](#)
[SUBSCRIBE](#)
[SUPPORT](#)
[CONTACT](#)

a not-for-profit literary press dedicated to promoting cross-cultural exchange through international literature in translation

[about](#)
[reviews](#)
[news](#)
[events](#)

from Chris Tucker *The Dallas Morning Review* -- a review of *The Vanishing Moon*

In an era when Donald Trump is king, and the stars of unreality TV shows earn more by gobbling insects than Mark Twain ever banked, we need talented novelists to explore the less affluent ZIP codes of America. First-timer Joseph Coulson does the job so well he is already being compared to James T. Farrell (the Studs Lonigan trilogy) and other skilled chroniclers of working-class life.

But Studs and his hard-bitten gang were prep-school dandies compared to the Tollman family whom Mr. Coulson follows across five decades from the 1930s to the late 1970s. Driven into poverty and homelessness by the Depression, the Tollmans endure winters outside Cleveland in an Army surplus tent with no electricity or running water. As Stephen (sensitive, open) and older brother Phillip (angry, opaque) struggle to protect their younger siblings from schoolyard cruelty and greater threats, their mother slowly goes blind. The family lacks money for medical care, and what little they have is soon squandered by the boys' ineffectual father, who then vanishes from their lives.

Mr. Coulson creates multiple views of the Tollmans as poverty, disgrace and, surprisingly, love erode the family's bonds. As young men, both Phillip and Stephen fall for Katherine Lennox, a gifted pianist and dabbler in socialist causes whose narrative turn takes us deeper into the brothers' psyches as she gives her body to one, her mind to the other. With World War II looming, Katherine breaks Stephen's heart by choosing Phillip, who in turn devastates her by escaping into the military.

Fast-forward 20 years and more, and we see what tragedy plus time have done to the brothers, Phillip, though more prosperous than his father, is a mocking, abusive alcoholic at war with the '60s, with racially

mixed Detroit, and with his son James, an aspiring writer who sums up Phillip's creed:

Manhood, for him, meant living without sympathy, compassion, or forbearance. It demanded a bitter kind of silence, the strength to show now weakness, to suffer alone and to leave alone those who suffer.

Stephen, by contrast, isn't afraid to show that he's vulnerable and does not wish to suffer alone, though readers may wonder if his intelligence and sympathy bring him more harm than good. Stephen's attempted reunion with Katherine, now a nightclub entertainer, makes up one of the novel's most affecting scenes.

A rich, variegated book, *The Vanishing Moon* meditates on family, need and the collision of personality with history. Joseph Coulson's impressive first novel should leave his readers eager for a second.

232 Third Street #A111 - Brooklyn, NY 11215 - 718.852.6134