

# A Relationship to Die For

By Danielle Conklin

Gay, William. *Twilight*. San Francisco: MacAdam/Cage, 2006. 224 p.

Who says that death is a sad occasion? For a necrophilic undertaker, death can be the start of a beautiful relationship. In *Twilight*, a Southern Gothic tale set in the 1950s, William Gay replaces the notion of the peaceful small town with a bleak vision of violence, corruption, and, of course, necrophilia. Not only are the good old days gone forever, they may have never existed at all.

Fenton Breece, the eccentric and affluent undertaker in this small town, is entrusted with the bodies of all the dearly departed citizens. Beloved mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers are turned over to Breece for their final preparations. His profession, coupled with his disturbing personality, makes him the town pariah. Yet, instead of confronting the townspeople as they chastise him or avert their gaze in his presence, Breece patiently awaits their deaths. All the dead come to him and he will ultimately have the upper hand. Breece could have continued his practice of postmortem revenge indefinitely had it not been for the suspicions of young Corrie and Kenneth Tyler. In the rain-drenched twilight, the two siblings dig into the earth to exhume their father's corpse and confirm their fears about Breece's business ethics. Upon opening more graves, they discover the extent of his criminal perversion. Among the horrors, "an old woman shared her resting place with a young man who'd had his throat straightrazored, and he lay humped athwart her thighs as they lay arm in arm in eternal debauchery."

Needing more evidence, Tyler steals Breece's briefcase. To his disgust and Corrie's satisfaction, the two find ample proof to support their claims. Within the case are silk underpants and photographs of Breece enjoying some extracurricular activities with his dead female clientele. Although Tyler wants to wash his hands of the whole twisted affair, his sister plans to taunt and punish Breece, and get a little nest egg in the process. Corrie confronts the undertaker about his crimes against the dead and sets a price of \$15,000 for the incriminating pictures.

Breece, however, is not willing to surrender and, in turn, hires the town's most notable and heartless criminal to retrieve his property. Granville Sutter is the poster child of Antisocial Personality Disorder and, thanks to his powers of intimidation, virtually above the law. In an instant, Corrie loses control of the situation and, through a terrible twist of fate, becomes one of Breece's "painted dead," the corpse bride of his dreams. With nothing left to lose after Corrie's death, Tyler sets out to escape Sutter and turn the photographs over to the only honest cop in the county. To do so, he must cross the untamed wilderness known as the "Harrikin."

When Tyler and Sutter enter this dark wilderness, it's as though "they were fleeing not only geographically, but chronologically, for they were fleeing into the past." The

Harrikin is a lonely place filled with people who have long since resigned themselves to solitude, and those who patiently concoct potions while awaiting visitors who may never come. The recently redeemed and reformed try to live out their lives in peace deep in the wilds. Ambling across this vast maze, Tyler meets them all.

While Breece falls further into his madness, living as husband-and-wife with Corrie's dead body, Sutter doggedly pursues Tyler through the dreamlike labyrinth of the Harrikin. It is impossible to tell whose determination is stronger, or who will win the race. One can only hope that goodness and justice will prevail, but there are no guarantees of a happy ending.

William Gay's imagery is among the best in Southern Gothic literature. His descriptions and metaphors are eloquent, but the language is nonetheless true to the characters. The dialogue is both raw and realistic. There is never any doubt that the reader has traversed time and space, landing squarely in the hinterlands of the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-Century South. The antagonists are unsettling and frightening, yet are not unfathomable. They could exist in any town, in any era. The most haunting horror stories are those that could really happen. In *Twilight*, Gay makes it all seem possible.

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