



# The Lost Saints of Tennessee

*Amy Franklin-Willis*

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With enormous heart and dazzling agility, Amy Franklin-Willis expertly mines the fault lines in one Southern working-class family. Driven by the soulful voices of forty-two-year-old Ezekiel Cooper and his mother, Lillian, *The Lost Saints of Tennessee* journeys from the 1940s to 1980s as it follows Zeke's evolution from anointed son, to honorable sibling, to unhinged middle-aged man.

After Zeke loses his twin brother in a mysterious drowning and his wife to divorce, only ghosts remain in his hometown of Clayton, Tennessee. Zeke makes the decision to leave town in a final attempt to escape his pain, throwing his two treasured possessions—a copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and his dead brother's ancient dog—into his truck, and heads east. He leaves behind two young daughters and his estranged mother, who reveals her own conflicting view of the Cooper family story in a vulnerable but spirited voice stricken by guilt over old sins and clinging to the hope that her family isn't beyond repair.

When Zeke finds refuge with cousins in Virginia horse country, divine acts in the form of severe weather, illness, and a new romance collide, leading Zeke to a crossroads where he must decide the fate of his family.

## The Lost Saints of Tennessee Details

Date : Published February 7th 2012 by Atlantic Monthly Press

ISBN : 9780802120052

Author : Amy Franklin-Willis

Format : Hardcover 343 pages

Genre : Family, Novels

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# From Reader Review *The Lost Saints of Tennessee* for online ebook

## **Jill says**

I read this book in one day...haven't done that much since becoming an adult, but Zeke was interesting enough for me to give up my day off. Great story about family and the troubles they encounter.

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## **Marty Seaney says**

This is a Southern novel from its honeysuckle cake to its 33 year old mentally challenged character, tapping into icons like Boo Radley and Benjy Compson and Paula Deen with one fell swoop. Oh, and there's a stinky hound dog to boot.

A gothic plot arcs its way throughout lives of well-meaning, doomed types that find both predictable solace and sadness in Johnny Cash and Dolly, Lucky Strikes, and teen pregnancies. Despite all of this the novel works for the most part because you care about the characters and what happens to them in their quest to overcome their doomed existence and the trite trimmings that weigh them down. Zeke, Jackie, Lillian, Honora, and even Tucker feel like real people/dogs who suffer and survive both despite each other and because of each other.

Carter's story was touching, but his demise didn't quite live up to its suspended telling. Benjy's final wailing and John Singers's demise will never be matched. Somehow the Southern novel needs to rise and move beyond this type of gothic rerun.

We really don't need to politely sit through a sweltering summer's day as Rosa Coldfield/ Lillian demand we listen to a story, her version, the really sad one to counter either what we are going to hear or what we have heard about the tragic events that doomed them all. The re-telling does not add any new layers of meaning or understanding, nor does it imbue the story with a latticed structure that speaks to the deep history of its characters and the land that holds them captive. It actually just distracts one from the energy of the main narrator, Zeke.

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## **Erin Cashman says**

*Lost Saints of Tennessee* is one of those rare, remarkable books that draws you in on the very first page, makes you laugh, makes you cry, and simultaneously breaks your heart and fills you with hope. At its core it's a story of a family, told by two characters, Zeke and his mother, Lillian, who are both hungry for more than what life has in store for them in their small town in Tennessee. The reader learns the hopes, dreams, tragedies and failings of the family members through these two different points of view, as both characters come to terms with the past, and their own flaws, while trying to wrestle their demons. Ultimately, love and redemption triumph over disappointment and resentment and binds this family together.

Amy Franklin-Willis is such a talented writer, possessing a magic that reminds me of John Irving. Her writing is both poignant and descriptive, and never over done.

In short, I would highly recommend this book.

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### **Laurel Wicke says**

I picked this book up off the shelf at Barnes and Noble during Spring Break. It was the Pat Conroy quote on the front cover that got me. I like his work and he described this one as, "A riveting, hardscrabble book on the rough, hardscrabble south, which has rarely been written about with such grace and compaasion." Yeah...I get that a little...but upon reflection I give it just 3 stars. I liked it okay; it just didn't really change me or stay with me. The writing wasn't bad, but would I put it up there with Conroy's work? No. And I didn't love the provocative sex scene that did nothing to drive the plot forward. Suddenly I felt like I was reading a Harlequin romance. It just seemed out of place and completely unnecessary. It would keep me from recommending it to most of my friends.

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### **Nicole says**

Upon finishing *Lost Saints*, my first thought is why the title? If it was mentioned or alluded to, I guess I missed it.

Zeke is a 40 something, divorced, and depressed man contemplating his past. As his story unfolds, the reader finds out about his twin brother's tragic death and his strained relationship with his mother.

The book goes back and forth in time. Most chapters are from Zeke's perspective, but some are given from his mother's.

*Lost Saints* is a southern novel about the dysfunctions of family and the tragedies that we never get over. In the early chapters of the book I really liked it. Somewhere along the way, my interest began to diminish. I think the author succeeds at showing how our pains of the past can really screw up our present. But I am realizing that if I can't attach to the characters, I just don't enjoy a novel very much. Zeke and his mother made very selfish decisions that deeply hurt those around them. Although remorse seemed to be expressed by both, I didn't see it reflected in their subsequent actions.

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### **Jenny says**

I could've loved this book but there were moments of vulgarity in descriptions that I didn't think necessary. Otherwise it's a good story of the need for forgiveness within family and self.

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### **Jo (Bloomin'Chick) says**

I finished reading this on July 11th and seven days later, I'm still trying to gather my thoughts on this wonderful novel into something cohesive and that which resembles a review! In a nutshell: I love it. I simply loved it. In a word: Transportive. Amy's writing captured my interest right from the get-go and transported me into the world of her novel, where, despite loneliness and grief, there is also hope. I couldn't put it down and when I did, I couldn't wait to get back to it. A perfect Summer read!

For my complete review, please visit: <http://theportablehomestead.blogspot....>

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## **JaHy?Hold the Fairy Dust says**

I was debating between 4 or 5 stars until I spoke with Carla. (*poor woman deserves a metal*)

In my humble opinion, when an author leaves me wishing their novel was longer, they deserve my higher rating.

Full review to come .

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## **PacaLipstick Gramma says**

I would rather have rated this a 4.5, but thought 4 stars was too low. With that being said . . .

I thought it was ironic that I should finish it on Mother's Day, as a lot of the book focused on the relationship of Zeke and his mother. Zeke had a lot of issues with his mother, and they were not unfounded. He felt ambivalence towards her, but refused to even speak with her to try to resolve it. His entire adult life was spent shutting her out.

Zeke also had a few other relationship issues, and I enjoyed the way the author explored why he felt the way he did. There was an honesty to his feelings, but he internalized them, thus harming his relationships. So many times relationships falter because we may lack the knowledge or inability to see both sides on an issue, but also exposing our true feelings makes us vulnerable. Zeke was a product of his generation where "feelings" were not talked about.

As a divorced father, he struggled with that too. I liked this quote from the book. *My girl thinks the reason I'm such a shitty dad is something she or Lou did. How could I forget how innocent they are? People say children are resilient, and maybe that's true, but what is not said enough, or at least not by anyone I know, is how small the world is to a child. It begins and ends with her family and when that breaks down somehow-through divorce, adultery, sickness, death-the child loses trust in everything she knows.*

This book made me think about the relationships that I have with the people I love. Am I the best I can be? Have I given my best, or settled for less because giving my best is a lot of work?

I really enjoyed this book and will be recommending it.

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## **Nancy Houston Fields says**

Publication date: 02/01/2012 ISBN: 9780802120052

Every once in a while I come across a book that has such an endearing quality to it that I have to rave a little

about it. Amy Franklin-Willis made this book one, that to me, is unforgettable. I'm only sorry I can't give it more than five stars.

Ezekiel (Zeke) loads a few things into his pick-up truck, lifts his late brother's dog, Tucker, onto the front seat and begins his one-way trip. Grief over his twin brother's death nearly ten years earlier, a failed marriage, longstanding family problems and major disappointment in the direction his life has gone bring him to the conclusion that his life must end. Zeke has just enough money, clothes and plenty of pain pills to end his misery. He and Tucker arrive in Pigeon Forge, TN to put his plan in motion, but at the last minute, everything goes wrong. The desire to live wins out and Zeke embarks on a memorable journey reviewing his life and heading toward new possibilities.

Not wanting to resume his former life in Clayton, TN, Zeke drives on into VA. He arrives at the home of his cousins to find unconditional love, acceptance and a chance to heal his wounded soul. Facing the past, dealing with new sorrows and planning for a future he never imagined, Zeke confronts the demons that have plagued him since childhood.

A delightful, yet tender account of one man's journey from absolute failure to the promise of forgiveness, renewal and hope.

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### **Donna says**

The Lost Saints of Tennessee was the perfect book for me to read right now, after having just finished reading a harrowing memoir. It was uncomplicated, endearing and engaging. That isn't to say it was shallow or empty, because it wasn't at all.

The story follows Ezekiel Cooper, a 40-something divorced father of two girls. When the story begins, he finds himself still unable to cope with the drowning death of his twin brother 10 years earlier, his divorce, and what he feels is his nowhere life, and he is seriously considering suicide. He begins taking the steps to follow through on his plan, when even that goes awry. Although this isn't a humorous book, there are elements of humor in it, and this is sort-of one of those times. But only sort-of.

There is also pathos and pain in the book, dealing with the death of loved ones and how our own families are often the ones who hurt us most, even when they are loving us as hard as they can. I related very much to that part of the book and especially to this line:

***"Does each of us have a quantity of forgiveness allotted to him? And once exhausted, do we lose the ability altogether?"***

I really enjoyed this book. It was well-written, and kept my interest throughout.

4.5 stars, rounded up to 5

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### **Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says**

When the word gets out, this book is going to find an enthusiastic following among fans of Southern

domestic fiction. It follows the fortunes and misfortunes of the Cooper family from the 1940s through 1985. The 1985 sections are told in the present tense.

The story opens in 1985 with Zeke Cooper, age 42, leaving his Tennessee hometown with the intention of committing suicide. He blames himself for the death of his twin brother Carter 10 years ago, and for the subsequent divorce from his wife Jackie. Instead of killing himself, he finds a haven with relatives in Virginia. This gives him the distance he needs to reflect on his mistakes and get some perspective on his family and its history.

Zeke narrates the story, with a brief section mid-book giving his mother Lillian a chance to tell her story. The family has seen more than its share of tragedy, sometimes self-inflicted and sometimes just bad luck. Teen pregnancies, infidelities, financial setbacks, substance abuse, deaths, divorces, and disease have taken their toll over the years.

Through Zeke's eyes we see his lifelong devotion to Carter, his twin whose brain was damaged by a childhood illness. We also see Zeke's stubborn refusal to forgive his mother for something she did 25 years ago -- something many of us might have done in her situation. When she faces a health crisis, Zeke must decide if he has punished her long enough.

Amy Franklin-Willis has put her all into the crafting of her first novel. Her prose flows beautifully and never gets bogged down. She knows her characters and has carefully worked out the complexities in their relationships.

More dramatic tension and less predictability would have made this a stronger, more convincing story for me. For all the heartache and hardship the characters suffer, the resolutions come a bit too smoothly. Once I got into the rhythm of the story, I could begin to guess way ahead of time what decisions the characters would make and how each situation would play out.

Were I a Southerner, I probably would have given the book four stars. It will appeal to readers who enjoy family dramas with a small-town Southern flair.

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## **Jaime Boler says**

*The Lost Saints of Tennessee* is the debut novel of Amy Franklin-Willis, an eighth-generation Southerner born in Birmingham, Alabama. She was "raised on the tall tales" of her father's "Huck Finn-like boyhood" growing up in Pocahontas, Tennessee, and those recollections inspired her multi-generational family saga. Although her story is set in the fictional town of Clayton, it serves as a "love letter" to her father's hometown. *The Lost Saints of Tennessee* also "pays homage" to her grandmother, who "made the best corn bread in the world, smoked cigarettes in the bathroom so she wouldn't set a bad example for her grandkids, and made strangers feel like family and family feel beloved." And that is exactly what you will feel for the Coopers and the Parkers as you read this book: these characters become like your family, and you will not want to let them go.

Franklin-Willis tells the story in two distinct yet compelling voices, Ezekiel "Zeke" Cooper and his mother Lillian Parker Cooper. Both first-person narratives speak to us back and forth through time from the 1940s to the 1980s, revealing the ups and downs, tragedies and triumphs, of a family.

Zeke is not at his best when we first meet him. Recently divorced from his high-school sweetheart, Jackie, distant from his two daughters, and still distraught over the tragic death of his twin brother, Carter, Zeke plans on killing himself and his beloved old dog, Tucker, in a motel room in Pigeon Forge. Because this is primarily a story about redemption and second chances, Zeke fails in his suicide attempt. We breathe a sigh of relief, because we are already invested in the story and in its characters.

Little by little, it is revealed that Zeke and his mother are somewhat estranged. He cannot forgive her for what she did to his twin, who was forever damaged after having the measles as a toddler. There is just too much on Zeke's shoulders, and he wants to get away from everything. Luckily, he finds an alternative to suicide. Zeke had briefly stayed with Lillian's cousins on a farm in Virginia when he went to college there. Georgia and Oz are childless and have not forgotten Zeke after all these years. In fact, they think of him as their son and open their home to him. On the Virginia farm, Zeke becomes a new man, learning about farming, working through his problems, and even finding a second chance at love.

Lillian, meanwhile, discovers she has lung cancer. "Isn't it amazing when you think about it—that a machine can see right through your skin, through your blood, and see what's wrong inside?" She must have surgery to remove her lung. Her first-person narrative really allows you to see what the family has been through and why certain choices were made in the past. Interestingly, Zeke sees her as a bad mother, yet as I read Lillian's account, I came away with the feeling she was anything but.

Parents, Lillian tells us, are not supposed to have favorite children. But she and her husband "took up favorites pretty early with the boys." Her favorite was Zeke. Lillian had wanted Zeke to escape the confines of Clayton. Her dream was for him to go to college. "You see those lights up in the sky, Ezekiel? You see the brightest one" she said. "That, my boy, is you. Don't let anybody tell you different. You're one of the chosen ones. God will strengthen you. That's what your name means." It was Lillian who persuaded Zeke to go to college in Virginia, and it was Lillian who kept the truth from him after a horrible accident. That catastrophe was the turning point in the relationship between mother and son. Nothing would ever be the same between them until Lillian's surgery brings the whole family together. A new chapter then begins for the Coopers and the Parkers.

I did find a few faults in the novel. Franklin-Willis is at her best when writing for Zeke and Lillian, but she tends to use too many stock characters. For example, Jackie takes on the role of jealous, whining, unhappy ex-wife. His older daughter, Honora, is mad at her father and seems to want to hurt him in any way she can. So what does she do? She turns to a boy who breaks her heart and ruins her reputation in Clayton. Zeke's love interest in Virginia is a divorced rich girl who rides horses. Zeke's twin, Carter, has the exact kind of life and death you would expect from someone with mental retardation. The real problem with Franklin-Willis, then, is that her story is often too predictable. She is much better at writing this family's past than she is at describing their present. Lillian's voice is particularly strong, and her remembrances mark my favorite part of *The Lost Saints of Tennessee*.

If you're looking for a feel-good story about family, love, redemption, and second chances, Franklin-Willis delivers all that and more. *The Lost Saints of Tennessee* is a heart-warming debut from a talented up-and-coming Southern author. I hope we see more of her.

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## **Victoria says**

I loved this book! It was just an amazing read - sad, funny, and all in all an absolute pleasure to read. I am so happy that I read this book! I read it in literally one sitting - I just couldn't put it down. The characters leaped off the page and I just became more and more invested in them as the story continued to unfold. But, you should probably keep the tissues handy, because this book goes through the whole spectrum of emotions! I really enjoyed reading it! Since Sweet Valley, I have always been a sucker for books about twins, and this was definitely a different sort of twin relationship than any I have read before. I simply adored it! This was, I believe, a debut novel, so I am looking forward to following Amy Franklin-Willis' career in the future.

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## **Diane S ? says**

This was an extremely bittersweet but memorable book. I became emotionally involved with this family, felt like I lived in this small town in Tennessee, suffered with them through their sorrows, and cheered for them when things went well. Felt so bad for Zeke, Carter and their mom, the choices they had to make, wished they could forgive each other and was happy when Zeke could finally forgive himself and learn to love again. Wonderfully written, heartfelt southern novel. Zeke and Carter are two characters I don't think I will ever forget. ARC by NetGalley

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## **Holly says**

Zeke Cooper leaves the town of Clayton just before the 10th anniversary of the death of his twin brother and best friend, Carter, leaving behind two daughters, an ex-wife, a mother stricken with cancer and sisters. He has spent the last 10 years in grief, guilt and regret over his brother's death, and last 25-26 years in regret over the damage caused by the beating to his brother at the hands of another Clayton resident. He leaves with his late brother's dog Tucker, a few clothes, money and pills from a previous injury on the job. At a hotel in Pigeon Forge he planned their deaths, putting pills in Tucker's foods and swallowing the rest himself. However he is not able to keep them down and in the midst of this he realizes what he has done and takes Tucker to the vet to save his life. He does and then embarks on a journey of redemption. He goes to visit his cousins in Virginia, under the guise of helping them on their peach and apple farm. When he gets there he finds the farm is in need of dire repair and the owner diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. He also meets a new love interest and attempts to repair his broken relationships with his daughters and mother.

5 stars

I received this book from Goodreads Firstreads.

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## **Amber at Fall Into Books says**

I won this book through goodreads.com's First Reads giveaways, and chose to give this book an honest review.

I entered to win this book because I was born and raised in Tennessee and because I thought the premise sounded interesting. I'm aware that it's not my normal Paranormal fare, but sometimes different is good, and overall, different was good in this book. The plot, though predictable, was emotional. I felt sympathy for

each of the characters. The idea of switching between the 1940s and 1980s is pure genius, and the fact that Franklin-Willis switched tenses with it was even better. She also switched narrators mid-stream in order to give the mother, Lillian a chance to tell her story. For the rest of the story, the narrator was Zeke.

One would think that when using that many literary tricks to make the book unpredictable that it would have been, well, unpredictable. Instead, I could predict every single situation's outcome before it happened. Many of the secondary characters were also stock/cookie-cutter characters. We had the typical jealous, whiny wife and the bratty teenage daughter. The only two characters who seemed to have any depth were Lillian and Zeke. It seemed like Franklin-Willis wasn't sure how to develop a character who wasn't a narrator.

Another problem with the book is that the situations were resolved too easily. None of the characters had to struggle that much in order to resolve their problems. That means that none of the characters really grew throughout the novel. I don't see the point in a book when the characters don't grow over the course of the novel. That's the entire point of reading a work of fiction, to watch the characters grow. Of course we all like the romance, suspense, etc., involved in works of fiction as well, but all of those plot devices serve to make the characters grow. In this book, I didn't feel like the characters grew that much.

Another thing that annoyed me, though this was just a personal preference, was the use of religion throughout the book. I really don't like to feel like a book is preaching to me, and at times, I did feel that way. I realize the southeast is the Bible Belt, and I know that Christianity plays a big part of their lives, but really it just got on my nerves. I mean I'm living back in the south now, and it still annoys me when people start preaching. I just don't like the preachy thing. I don't think it was intended this way in the book, but I felt that the whole God-fearing/loving thing was a bit too aggressive. It reminded me of some of my least favorite relatives.

The pacing of this book is pretty spot on. Even though I knew what was happening for most of the novel, I didn't get that bored. Franklin-Willis kept things interesting by exploring different aspects of the characters' lives and by switching from past to present.

Overall, I did not enjoy this book as much as I thought it would. For some reason, I was expecting a unique bildungsroman, or at the very least, a story in which the characters grew. However, for those who enjoy Southern Literature and the writing style associated with it, you will probably love this book. The writing itself is well-done, and I truly believe that once Franklin-Willis gets a few more books under her belt and works through her problem areas, she will be an unstoppable force in Southern Literature.

Check out other reviews, author interviews, and awesome giveaways at <http://falln2books.blogspot.com>

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### **Debi says**

Wow, just finished this debut novel and am blown away. Will write a longer review tomorrow, but if you see it on the new book shelf, grab it. And I'm not just saying that because I was raised in Tennessee.

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### **Nancy says**

I loved this book! Family relationships can be complicated and painful and people don't always make the

right choices in life. The characters seemed so real to me and reminded me that forgiveness and compassion can take us a long way on this journey in life.

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### **Susan (aka Just My Op) says**

3.5 of 5 stars. This Southern lit is a story of sad and desperate people making sad and desperate decisions. There is lots of family drama, lots of mistakes and regrets, there is hope and heart. Some of the writing is lovely.

The readers are told on the first page that Zeke, now an adult, lost his brother to a drowning incident ten years ago. We aren't told the circumstances, but learn that Carter was Zeke's twin, special in ways that mean learning is hard for him, he has a gentle soul, and he relies on his brother to help get him through life.

Zeke's whole life is colored by his brother and what happened to him.

I liked this characters in this book, and I liked the slow-moving story of family. The only reason I didn't rate this novel just a little higher is that there were too many references to Carter's drowning, which was perhaps supposed to be suspenseful but became just a bit annoying. Yes, I understand how it changed everything, I understand how important it was in the life of Zeke and his family, but I felt like I was being hit over the head with its importance. Still, this is a sweet book and I am glad that I read it.

I was provided a copy for review by the publisher, for which I am thankful.

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