

Life in a small town



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Small towns are often considered a safe place to grow up. Many who are born into these small towns never leave, perhaps because they are too frightened to leave all that they have ever known. These towns, however, are not without their problems. Rural small towns, especially in the South, carry a stigma of being prejudice against those who are different, which can still unfortunately be true to this day. In John Kennedy Toole's first novel, *The Neon Bible*, the negative stigma associated with living in a small town is explored. Toole, being a southern man himself, was able to display an accurate adolescent's view of a rural Southern town in the 1930's. A major theme in Toole's novel is the prejudice that can occur in a small town and he uses his characters to present his commentary on the topic.

The first example of Toole's take on small town judgment is the town's reaction to Aunt Mae. Her flashy clothes and exposure of skin attract dirty looks and judgment from the woman as well as mockery from the men. David, the protagonist and Mae's nephew, recalls a time when Aunt Mae first came to live with them. He remembers, " When I was four Mother gave a party for some of the wives of the factory workers, and Aunt Mae came into the living room in the middle of the party wearing a dress that showed almost all her front, except for the nipples, which I knew you could never show. The party ended soon after that, and as I was sitting on the porch, I heard the woman talking to each other as they left. And they were calling Aunt Mae all sorts of names like I had never heard before and I really didn't know the meaning of until I was almost ten years old" (Toole 6).

Toole was able to use this situation to exemplify how pity, jealous, and shallow small town women can be. This four-year- old boy was subjected to

hearing some awful things said about his Aunt that these women would have never said to her face. She chose to dress differently than these judgmental women and there is nothing that brings people closer together than a common enemy. In a larger environment, like a city, little things, like outfits, are so much more irrelevant than they are in small towns where there is not much to talk about. Aunt Mae is actually a very caring and kind woman but these small town women judge her character based on the way she presents herself. This specific interaction with the townspeople and Aunt Mae represents the judgment that was often a large part of the small town mentality. While the women judged Aunt Mae, the men both ogled and mocked her for having the audacity to show some skin. David recalls, “ the men were always nice, though, but used to laugh about her when she wasn’t around. It made me feel bad when they did, because there wasn’t a man in town that Mae didn’t like” (Toole 10).

Ironically, the men are even more two-faced than the women in this small town. They are kind and even sometimes flirty to her face but then they make fun of her with each other behind her back. David, the narrator, looking back and remembering how terrible he felt for Aunt Mae when he was so young makes the reader realize how judgmental the townspeople really were. Toole was able to make the reader see the ugly side of small towns with the various negative reactions to Aunt Mae purely based on her appearance.

Aunt Mae was the first object of reticule for the town presented in the novel, but unfortunately, she was not the last. David’s entire family was very harshly judged after David’s father lost his job. David’s first teacher, Mrs.

Watkins, vocalizes the things that have been going around about David's family to David in an attempt to humiliate him. When he is late to class one day, she says, "He's one of the poor folks that lives up on the hills and don't have the money to buy an alarm clock" (Toole 43). Then, after David accidentally lets out a belch, Mrs. Watkins slaps him hard across the face and says, "I hope the Lord will be merciful with you for your behavior to those trying to instruct you in His path. You and your family are fallen-away Christians. You are not on the church rolls anymore. I see that. I see all those things" (Toole 44). Mrs. Watkins is judging David's family, who barely has enough money to buy food, for not tithing anymore. Toole was able to present the unspoken rules of a religious, small town society with these statements from Mrs. Watkins. Although families are not forced to give to the church weekly, if they do not, their faith is questioned and their "sins" are judged by those who follow Jesus Christ, a man who ironically stressed forgiveness in his teachings.

Another point that often came up in Christ's teachings was to love thy neighbor, but the people in the valley were never able to illustrate that lesson. During the time frame of the novel, World War II was taking place and many of the boys in the valley were drafted to fight. Some, like David's father, never came back. Others came back and married girls who they had known their whole lives, but there were a few that came back with foreign women. When the revival comes to town, the boys of the valley had not yet returned home. Bobbie Lee Taylor, the revival's speaker, vocalizes the fears of all the mothers of the soldiers in the audience by saying, "Every day more soldiers and sailors and marines and colonels and privates and

lieutenants are taking up with foreign women and even marrying them! Do you want your son to return home with a foreign wife, maybe even a heathen? ... Do you want a Chinese in your house taking care of your grandchildren, nursing them from her breast?" (Toole 69) Bobbie Lee Taylor may not have been from the valley, but he expressed the fears of most everyone in the crowd with his sermon. These people were afraid of that which they did not know, and these women from Europe and Asia who their sons were bringing home were too different. They did not want their family bloodline being soiled by other races and believed these women were "heathens" just because they were a different ethnicity. Toole highlighted the racist, prejudice, and elitist mindsets that were synonymous with living in a small town in the south at that time.

One of the audience members that Bobbie Lee's speech particularly affected was Flora, a woman from the valley. After the sermon was over, Aunt Mae and Flora had a conversation about Bobbie Lee's words. David recalled, "She worried about what Bobbie Lee said... She told Aunt Mae she didn't want any Chinese grandbabies on her knee with their dangerous-looking mother hanging around the house" (Toole 75). Regardless of who the woman was or how much the son cared about the woman, Flora would not have accepted this woman that her son brought home or the children he conceived with her. The very idea of her son marrying someone of a different race scares her enough to write him a letter warning him. Many of these small town types can be very closed minded and ignorant, using prejudice as a defense mechanism for that which is different and strange to them.

While some of the townspeople, like Flora, only talked about their fears, others, like the Preacher, actually took action. After the war was over and the soldiers returned home, David recalls, “ Some of the men came back to the valley with women they married in Europe. The town people wouldn’t have anything to do with them, so they all got together and moved to the capital. On the radio the preacher said it was good riddance and that he didn’t want to see the good American blood of the valley lose its purity. That won a lot of the town people back on his side, so pretty soon the church rolls were filled again and kept on growing. Some got together in the church hall and organized a society to keep the valley blood pure and Christian and free from the heathen blood that might ruin it and bring damnation to the valley. Not everyone in town joined it, but it had a pretty big membership. It met once a week for a while until all the soldiers who weren’t killed got home, and then they didn’t need it anymore” (Toole 95).

The preacher is a prime example of small town prejudice. He does not hide the fact that people from outside of the town, especially those of differing races or ethnicities, are not welcome. If they do try to establish themselves in the valley, they will ultimately be forced out, allowing the town to retain its “ purity.” These couples are forced to move to the capital where mixed marriages are far more accepted than they are in the valley. By mentioning this “ society,” Toole was able to present how ridiculous he thought the close-mindedness associated with small towns was. The narrator, David, never specifically gives his opinion about the prejudice against the foreign women, but the tone in which the recollection about it is written expresses Toole’s disapproval. Toole uses the preacher to exemplify this small town

discrimination again when the preacher decides to institutionalize David's mother, regardless of the family's wishes.