



Tending to Virginia

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Jill McCorkle's novel is set in modern-day North Carolina, a place where the customs of the Old South are dying. The main character is Virginia Suzanne (Ginny Sue) Ballard, a twenty-eight-year-old woman just past her seventh month of pregnancy; in the course of the novel, she reflects on her marriage, her past, her family, and her future. One of her concerns is the loss of closeness in families (especially between mothers and daughters) because of the geographical distances imposed by career moves. Virginia also remembers the warmth and familiarity of her maternal grandmother's house, recently torn down and replaced by a Piggly Wiggly convenience store.

McCorkle also highlights the lives of several women in Ginny Sue's family. A helpful genealogical chart is provided at the opening of the book, but McCorkle's writing always clearly delineates her characters and their relationships. Among these women are Emily, Virginia's maternal grandmother; Rolena (Lena), Emily's childless sister; Hannah, Virginia's mother; Madge, Hannah's cousin; and Cindy, Madge's daughter. McCorkle plays these characters off one another with brilliant dialogue and provides enticing personal reflections by each woman.

The climax of the action comes during a severe thunderstorm on a hot summer day when all the women are assembled at Emily's new duplex house to help Virginia in her illness. At this point, secrets hidden for years by one woman or another are revealed, personal desires are expressed, and frustrations are voiced. In this crucial scene, the women give the love and support to one another that in the past have often been withheld or left unexpressed. The novel ends as Virginia feels her first labor pains.

McCorkle's extensive narrative range in *TENDING TO VIRGINIA* is handled with great skill, and the themes she covers are equally wide ranging: marriage, childbirth and child rearing, women's sexual lives, intergenerational conflicts, and employment for women. Throughout, McCorkle's voice is powerful and very memorable.

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