

Book Review: *Brother, Brother* by Clay Carmichael

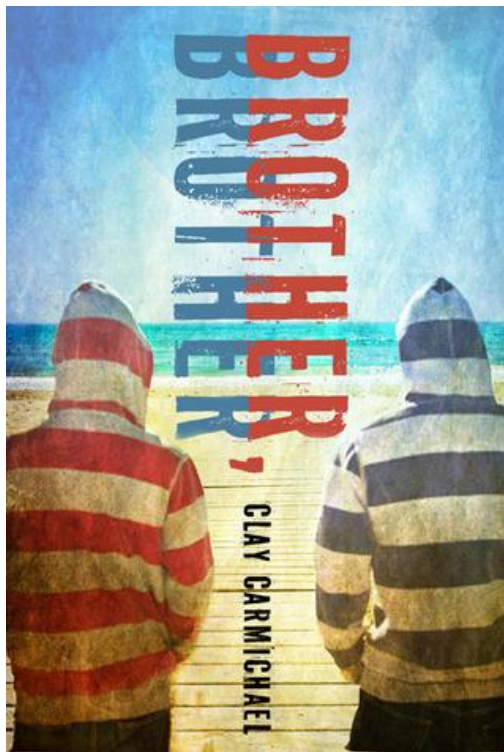


Loose Ends and Family Ties

Brother, Brother by Clay Carmichael.

When Chapel Hill native and Carrboro resident Clay Carmichael tells a story, she uses the familiar themes of loss, lessons, and love plus a sharp talent for unfolding life mysteries like peeling layers of skin off an extra-large onion.

In her 2009 award-winning middle-grade book, *Wild Things* (Front Street), young Zoe loses the mother she'd begun to take care of and has to learn how accept her uncle into her life. In Carmichael's more recent young adult novel, *Brother, Brother*, 17-year old Billy "Brother" Grace is reared by a poor and loving but secretive grandmother. On the morning that "Mem" dies, his whole world changes.



Brother has had a less-than-stellar life in Schuyler, North Carolina. He doesn't know who his father was, and his unwed mother died when he was 3. To care for Mem while she was ill and supplement her paltry income, he left school at 16 to take a job at a nursing home. Now, with Mem gone, Brother finds himself alone in the world.

Although he takes his grandmother's death hard, Brother is sensible and respectful. He ties up the loose ends of her life, but when he finds a newspaper Mem had been reading, grief turns to shock. On the front page, Mem had circled the photos of a much-despised high-profile politician and his son, a drug addict who is Brother's mirror reflection. She had spoken very little about family, but even Brother knows this boy is his twin. The loose ends of Mem's and Brother's lives unravel in a heartbeat, yet Brother knows what he has to do.

A guiding figure even in death, Mem brought Brother up to be true to himself and treat people kindly. Indeed, it is evident that he unfailingly thinks of others before himself as the story progresses. Her words, "Pay attention, pay attention, pay attention," along with her reminding him to think *for* himself (not *of* himself) and to question rather than speculate stay with Brother as he leaves Schuyler to find the truth about his family.

Discovery after explosive discovery keep the tension tight enough to snap while imperfect but fully developed characters, teens and adults alike deal with their own emotionally damaged lives and engage in serious battles of will.

Carmichael's superb writing, timing, and solid sense of place gives the reader a gentle and selfless young man who, in trial after trial, maintains his composure, his manners and his self-respect. As the eye of the family hurricane that suddenly churns and rages all around him, *Brother* manages to find more than he thought he was looking for and comes to understand what and who are most meaningful to him. – *Jeanne E. Fredriksen*

Brother, Brother by Clay Carmichael. Roaring Brook Press, Macmillan: New York. 2013. 321 pages. For grades 8-12. This review appeared in *The Rolesville Buzz* newspaper.