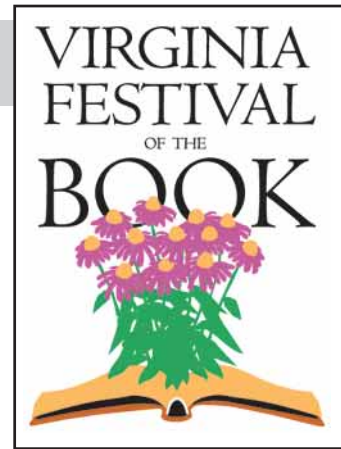


Christopher Tilghman's *Mason's Retreat* recommended by Henry Wiencek

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. Henry Wiencek, author of *The Hairstons* has selected Christopher Tilghman's *Mason's Retreat*. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss together a work that raises issues and questions of our times. Please join Henry Wiencek and us this month in reading *Mason's Retreat*.



It is hard to hold back the superlatives in describing Christopher Tilghman's novel, *Mason's Retreat*. Gripping and emotionally powerful, deeply textured and exquisitely written, it is one of the finest portrayals of family life in recent literature, and a profound exploration of tragedy. *Mason's Retreat* unfolds against the backdrop of the Great Depression of the 1930s and an impending World War II. Those historical tides surge through the plot, but the book's heartbreaking power lies in its account of an awful calamity arising ineluctably from a series of commonplace events.

The author set the novel on his home ground, Maryland's Eastern Shore. The Tilghmans are one of Maryland's distinguished old families, as are the fictional Masons. The novel opens with the journey of the Masons—Edward and Edith with their young sons Sebastien and Simon—to Edward's ancestral family home, the Mason's Retreat of the title. Indeed, it is refuge that they seek. They had been living in England, but the Depression has squeezed Edward's manufacturing business and turned his marriage brittle. To Edith, her husband "was a man who sparkled when successful," but worry has turned him secretive and glum.

The Masons' arrival at the Retreat is a great comic setpiece of dashed expectations. Long unoccupied, the house is sliding into ruin as rapidly as its owners. Here, Tilghman introduces his cast of subsidiary characters: Loretta and Valerie, the African-American house ser-

vants; McCready, the manager; and a range of dotty neighbors. Robert, the Retreat's black farm hand, is one of Tilghman's best creations. A World War I veteran whose duties were to dig the white man's toilets and bury the dead, Robert must come to terms with the limits of his existence at the Retreat. The estate cost him his wife, an educated woman who left him because she refused to live in rural poverty and subservience.

The estate's name is ironic, because there is no retreat for the Masons—Edith yearns not for peace but for passion, and Edward soon itches to return to England, where rumors of impending war revitalize his factory and his dreams of wealth and influence. In a beautifully written and resonant scene, the Masons attend a skating party on a frozen river, on whose surface a roaring bonfire is built. To Edith's astonishment, the flames do not burn through the ice but leave only a small indentation. Edith falls under the spell of this seeming impossibility—and the idea arises that she can indulge in the hottest passion and reveal hardly a trace of it to her frozen husband. One Mason does find peace at the Retreat, the older son, Sebastien, who unexpectedly discovers joy in rough farm work and friendship with Robert.

Tilghman steers clear of family curse clichés. The Masons are undone not by a hidden horror from the distant past but by a combination of the present's small deceptions, an infidelity, one woman's petty desire to get revenge for

old slights, and a family's natural impulse to protect a child from disappointment. It is not giving away too much to reveal that, yes, the Masons are undone, but they are also to a degree reborn to contemplate, as Edward does, the end of dreams and the meaning of the prophet Isaiah's bitter lament, "Ah, sinful nation!"

Mason's Retreat is one of the most beautifully written novels you will ever read; a superb book about childhood, marriage, and race; its erotic scenes tempt the reader, like the characters, to hope briefly that crimes have no consequence. Though domestic in its scale, the book tells a universal story as its rich, soft tones illuminate the subtle maneuvers of human tragedy.

Virginia Festival of the Book

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