

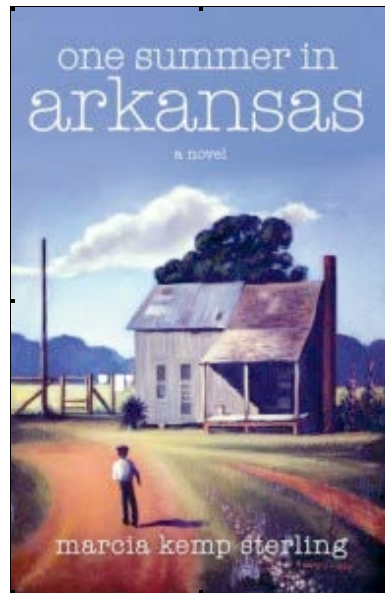
# everyday epistle

by Aimee Whetstine

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## Book Review: 'One Summer in Arkansas' by Marcia Kemp Sterling

Marcia Kemp Sterling's first novel *One Summer in Arkansas* draws readers into the "intoxicating warmth" of a southern summer, from Thomas Hinton's soulful cover art to the final twist of resolution.



The story spins around small-town golden boy Lee Addison. His smarts, hard work, and genes are about to pay off. At the behest of his mother, Lee returns to his hometown of Riverton in rural Arkansas to spend one last summer there between graduating from Stanford Law School and beginning his career. It's the early 90s, and Lee is poised for success in the sleek, corporate law firms of San Francisco. But Lee's last summer in Riverton resurrects a tangle of abandonment, addiction, murder, passion, and sullied histories that rise to burn with the summer temperatures.

Sterling tells the story from the points-of-view of Lee and other characters, mostly women. We meet Lee's functional alcoholic mother Frances Dawkins Addison as she navigates the country club scene alone. We are privy to the heart of Riverton's "prize," teacher Annie Rayburn, the high school girlfriend Lee left behind for college. We follow Lee's fragile, teenaged sister M.J. on a precarious downward spiral. We stop with Lee to visit Etta Jones,

the curious, elderly African-American neighbor who still lives in the house where she was born.



### **Marcia Kemp Sterling**

A theme of running weaves through the book. All the young people run. Lee runs. Annie runs. Lee's Stanford girlfriend Zoe runs. M.J. tries to keep up. Meanwhile, the older characters survive by standing still. Etta is a constant, sitting on her front porch as the story swirls. Frances is immovable, too, having never left Riverton. But where Etta is resilient and fixed, Frances is broken and stuck. An experienced attorney, Sterling touches on heavy subjects: racism, injustice, infidelity, addiction, ageism, classism, religion, the tension between rural and urban, and the inner workings of litigation.

My favorite moments in the book came with Sterling's masterful descriptions of place—the humid, southern summer in a small town and the contrasting cool perfection of Silicon Valley. Although Sterling was raised in Arkansas and I grew up in North Carolina, there were times when I thought surely we hail from the same neighborhood. Take for example this excerpt where Lee puts together the scene of Dewaine Washington's suspicious death at Riverton's swimming hole:

*“Lee tried to imagine what it was like on the day the boy died. That early in May there would have been splashes of pink, fuchsia and white scattered throughout the hillside forest from small volunteer dogwoods and redbuds still in bloom. The sky would have been lit by a softer sun, exposing patches of color in the understory of tall deciduous trees not yet leafed out (p. 83).”*

Passages like that take me home, and this book is full of them. It's also full of surprises. Sterling deviates from the expected crime-solved-story-over ending. **Her narrative is more complex. Like a southern summer, it pulses on and closes with tension still hanging in the air.**

Chapter one of *One Summer in Arkansas* opens with these verses:

*“Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.” -- Ecclesiastes 9:11-12 NRSV*