



A Density of Souls

Christopher Rice

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Take the sensuous, fecund New Orleans setting, add a generous helping of tangled Southern family history, and season liberally with a sensitive teenage boy rejected by his friends and frightened of his own homoerotic impulses and you wouldn't be surprised to discover that the novel containing all of the above was written by someone named Rice. But a few paragraphs into the first page, it's clear that Anne Rice's son's first novel isn't about vampires or witches and does not otherwise read like one of her exceedingly popular books. The only family resemblance is in the setting, the sexual orientation of the lovingly described male characters, and the scent of overripe magnolias. There's murder, suicide, and madness at the heart of this rather clumsy coming-of-age story, which focuses on the youthful friendship of Stephen Conlin, Meredith Ducote, Greg Darby, and Brandon Charbonnet. This friendship is destroyed by a sexual incident that takes place just before the foursome enters Cannon, an exclusive prep school. There, Stephen is ostracized by his former friends, now the most popular kids on campus, who'd just as soon forget their own complicity in the event. Envy, passion, and rage drive the narrative, but the emotions are as juvenile as the characters, and the long passages depicting the rituals and cruelties of high school, from pep rallies to football games, slow down the pace without really illuminating character or motivation. The novel reads like a roman à clef. Rice might have been wiser to tell someone else's story rather than his own. --Jane Adams

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