

TIM GAUTREAUX THE NEXT STEP IN THE DANCE 1998

“A mighty first novel, told with cinematic grip . . . Gautreaux himself takes the next step in the moody, sweet dance of southern literature.” —GQ

Bringing the same light and gentle understanding that he did to the story collection *Same Place, Same Things*, author Tim Gautreaux tells the tale of Paul and Colette, star-crossed and fractious lovers struggling to make it in rural south Louisiana.

When Colette, fed up with small town life, perceives yet another indiscretion by the fun-loving Paul, she heads for Los Angeles, with big dreams and Paul in tow.

Paul's attempts to draw his beautiful young wife back home to the Cajun bayou, and back to his heart,

make up a tale filled with warmth, devotion and majestically constructed scenes of Southern life, in *The Next Step in the Dance*.

“A smartly turned-out first novel, about the push and pull between a young Louisiana couple, that holds you snug and won't let go . . . [an] A.” —Entertainment Weekly

“[What] wins us over is Gautreaux's powerful, often poetic mix of colorful detail and rapid-paced suspense, not to mention his keen ear for Cajun dialect.” —The New York Times Book Review

“This is both an elegy for a disappearing way of life and a celebration of enduring values.” —The New Orleans Times-Picayune

“An entertaining and immensely likable debut novel, set mostly in Louisiana's southwestern Gulf Stream area . . . As a storyteller, and especially as one with such a good eye for character, Gautreaux looks like one of the best writers to have emerged in the 1990s.”

—Kirkus Reviews

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An unexpected treat of a novel, full of vivid local flavour with its setting on a bayou in deepest Louisiana. It follows a few difficult years in the lives of a young married couple, portraying both central characters as interesting and complex people deeply rooted in the supportive network of relatives and friends

The author's obvious in-depth knowledge of the area as well as engineering and fishing provides descriptions and the plot amiably meanders along towards a tense and emotional ending.

Gautreaux's powerful, character-driven debut novel breathes new life into the theme of mismatched lovers. Paul and Colette Thibodeaux have nothing in common: he's a machinist with apparently no ambition other than jitterbugging and bar fighting; she is a bank teller who longs for the good life in Southern California.

After they separate, she escapes from their small Louisiana bayou town to the land of her dreams. Paul follows her to L.A., where his skill in maintaining and repairing antiquated machinery lands him the highest paying job of his life. However, California turns sour for both Colette and Paul, who eventually return, separately, to their hometown of Tiger Island.

In the short time they have been away, the oil industry has flattened out, and many of the town's businesses are as bust as their marriage. The novel's triumph is its sense of community--unforgettable characters in a setting that is at once familiar and exotic--and how that sense can overcome the hazards of life.

From Kirkus Reviews

An entertaining and immensely likable debut novel, set mostly in Louisiana's southwestern Gulf Stream area, from the talented Gautreaux (stories: *Same Place, Same Things*, 1996). When beautiful and brainy Colette Jeansomme marries good-looking Paul Thibodeaux (who's also a terrific dancer and the best damn mechanic in the pair's hometown of Tiger Island), their friends are sure it's the perfect match.

But Colette tires of her unfulfilling bank teller's job and can't tolerate Paul's enthusiastic participation in the cult of Saturday night fistfighting or his habit of dancing (and, she suspects, enjoying further intimacies) with other women

not to mention his perfect satisfaction with his job ("He has no ambition," she complains. "Fifty years from now he'll still be knee-deep in machine oil").

Threatening divorce, Colette flees to California, followed soon afterward by the contrite yet still feisty Paul.

More complications in their stormy relationship, coupled with the inability of each to adapt to West Coast work- and life-styles,

send them separately back to Tiger Island and a succession of crises (including Colette's encounter with a cottonmouth moccasin and Paul's perilous adventures both with an overheated boiler and a shrimp boat caught in a storm)

that end with the two back where we know they've belonged from the beginning: together, whether they drive each other crazy or not.

Though it's more than a little overplotted, Gautreaux's pitch-perfect account of the Thibodeauxes' bumpy road to love is powered by abundant energy and charm and by a town filled with vividly rendered supporting characters

(Paul's laconic reality instructors, his father and grandfather, lead a memorable parade of locals).

And the story is set in a workingman's world that's fully, credibly, and (to the nonmechanical reader) sometimes even confusingly detailed.

Gautreaux knows how to tell a story! His descriptions are vivid but not verbose and his characters, despite their many quirks, are believable and interesting. It is refreshing to read a love story that does not shy away from the difficulties and issues that people face in

relationships. Even though most individuals will not live in the bayous of Louisiana almost anyone can relate to the personal journey that the two main characters make as they struggle to live life and learn to love.

Tim Gautreaux's debut novel is a fine romance set in Tiger Island, Louisiana. Colette and Paul Thibodeaux have been married for about a year when Colette gets restless and dreams of a world bigger than the "small muddy pond" that they currently reside in. She leaves Paul and moves to California, and Paul reluctantly follows. The story moves somewhat slowly in the beginning, but quickens its pace after they leave California (with Paul having gotten Colette pregnant) and return home to their now-impooverished town.

Colette as a character often comes across as a whiny brat, but she redeems herself by the story's climax.

Paul is written as a simple country boy with a heart of gold; It seems that he can do no wrong.

Tim Gautreaux's first novel is a good one. "The Next Step in the Dance" is a fairly engaging love story set in Southern Louisiana, Los Angeles, and Southern Louisiana (again). The writing is first rate and the glimpse into Bayou Country life is entertaining, moving, and informing. This novel is at times poignant, humorous, and riveting and each phase well-developed.

Essentially a story about the love between two lifelong residents of the Bayou--Paul and Colette Thibodeaux--this is a novel of several phases. The early part of the novel details the nascent marriage of Paul and Colette and its unraveling.

From the beginning, there's an obvious gulf in Paul and Colette's relationship.

Paul is a satisfied, unambitious machinist (and a darn good one) who likes to drink, stay out late dancing, and occasionally fighting with other patrons of the town's many nightspots.

Colette is the town's best looking woman and full of ambition. She's a driven, hardworking, independent woman, and when Paul is caught at the drive-in with another woman, she decides to make a change.

Paul's love for Colette is true and in spite of appearances, he's committed and faithful, although he tends to make some unintelligent decisions. But that's not enough for Colette. She wants more stability, more attention, and more things (i.e., money). And here lies the only real complaint I have with this otherwise terrific novel--Colette's character is either not properly developed or she really is the self-centered, ambitious woman Gautreaux has portrayed.

The first phase of the novel ends here with Colette taking a train to California to follow her dream (and ambitions).

Colette lands on her feet in California and finds a very good job at a bank (albeit surrounded by a lecherous boss) where she seems somewhat content and rarely thinks about Paul or the life she's left behind.

Eventually Paul follows her to California where he, too, finds a decent job and they live in separate apartments three blocks apart from one another. One thing leads to another and eventually they both head back to Louisiana (at different times) and find that a poor economy

has essentially eliminated all the jobs in town. Thus begins the final and most entertaining, moving, and adventuresome part of the novel.

The author describes the struggles facing the town and Paul and Colette in moving detail and describes the lengths each is willing to go to in order to make ends meet. Their relationship remains unreconciled, but they do interact and Paul's unrelenting, unconditional, (and to my mind, unwarranted) love for Colette persists

Each face many challenges through this rapidly paced last part of the novel and their feelings for each other are central to the action--and there's plenty of action, both on the water, in the town, and in the plant where Paul and Colette work for a man Colette dated prior to heading to California. We continue to learn more about each character and feel sympathy for Paul and his struggles. However, Colette is very difficult to sympathize with and Paul's obdurate affection for this seemingly self-centered woman does grow old at times.