

***Backseat Saints* by Joshilyn Jackson. 352 pages. 2010, Grand Central Publishing**

When an airport gypsy spies death in Ro Grandee's cards, she tells Ro that she must kill her husband, Thom, or be killed by him. Ro is fully aware of her husband's violent tendencies. She's served as his punching bag one time too many to be naïve.

Seeing the truth in the gypsy's words, Ro considers her options and decides to shoot Thom while he's jogging. The plan goes awry when Ro misses Thom and hits her sweet, chubby hound, Gretel, instead.

The near miss seems to give Thom a new appreciation for his wife, Gretel adjusts to life with three legs, and things get better for a while. But Ro can't easily dismiss the gypsy's warning. Digging deep to remember the tough, take-charge girl Rose Mae Lolly once was; Ro begins searching for her high school sweetheart, Jim.

Thom realizes that Ro up to something, and assumes she's having an affair. He nearly kills her, and Ro realizes that she's out of time. She loads Gretel into the car and runs for home. Ro hopes that Fruiton, Alabama will hold some clue that will lead her to the mother that abandoned her when she was just 8 years old, leaving her with an abusive, alcoholic father. What she finds instead is her father, who's got his AA five-year pen and an apology he's been waiting longer than that to deliver.

Ro realizes that it won't take Thom long to track her to her hometown, so she strikes out again, still determined to find her mother. Ro's journey leads her across the country to California, with Thom in hot pursuit. Along the way, she realizes that she's going to have to embrace her inner bad girl, but let go of some of the baggage that girl's been carrying, in order to survive.

Author Joshilyn Jackson has crafted a gripping, poignant novel and funny novel. *Backseat Saints* made the list of books I just couldn't put down. I was drawn in by Rose, who is so much more than she seems to be.

In less-skilled hands, Ro could have been bitter, angry and self-righteous. But Jackson artfully shows her readers why a beautiful, capable woman like Ro would stay with a man like Thom. It's not just about low self-esteem and her abusive father. The truth is much messier.

One of the things I like best about Jackson's books is her way with words. She turns phrases that perfectly capture her character's voices and their surroundings. I could see the trail and the ditch Ro hid in to shoot Thom as clearly as if I were standing there. I laughed out loud when Arlene climbed a tree to avoid talking to Ro. I cried with Ro when she realized how much she was going to have to let go of in order to reclaim herself.

Backseat Saints is a perfect read for a hot, humid Southern summer afternoon. Just crack it open and hang on – it's a heck of a ride!

