

Chicago Tribune Apr. 1, 1990

CLOVER

By Dori Sanders

Algonquin. 183 pp.

"I guess you would call me a scared little girl, all alone with a scared woman. I suppose there is nothing all that strange about a stepmama and a stepchild living alone. In our case, I guess it's just how we happened to end up together." How Clover Lee Hill and Sara Kate Colson Hill ended up together is strange indeed.

Ten year-old Clover's mother died before the girl could know her. A strong bond grew between Clover and her widower father, Gaten, because "when a daddy is all you have left you end up with double love." When Gaten finds a woman he wants to marry, things start whirling in the northern South Carolina town of Round Hill where the cultured, kindly Gaten serves as the first black public school principal. Miss Sara Kate is white, an old college friend from Clemson where Gaten was her math tutor and confidante. But in Round Hill "she just doesn't seem to fit in anyplace." Clover had hoped for a purple ten-speed bicycle, not a stepmother, and cries at the news.

The novel opens just after the wedding, at Gaten's funeral. Hours after the wedding, a pickup truck sped through a red light and crashed into Gaten's car. The wedding-baked meats coldly furnish forth the funeral table where Sara Kate sits between Clover and Gaten's brother Jim Ed, "squeezed in between us on the crowded bench like vanilla cream between dark chocolate cookies." From there, the narrative, like *Beowulf*, spins into past and future via many digressions.

Who will care for Clover? Jim Ed's wife, Aunt Everleen, who has known Clover all her life, appears likelier than some alien white stepmother Clover barely knows. But Sara Kate asserts quietly, "I promised Clover's father I would take care of his daughter." That settles matters: "Nobody around here messes with a dying man's wishes."

How Clover and Sara Kate adjust to the combined traumas of Gaten's death and their new domestic arrangement forms the novel's focus. Their pathetic situation, while affecting, creates a major challenge for first-novelist Sanders, who manages admirably to keep her characters more absorbing than the dilemma in which they are plunged.

Sanders creates a rich sense of place and populates Round Hill with a quirky assortment of women. There's Miss Merlee Kenyon, whom Gaten had courted until she announced "she sure didn't spend the best years of her life getting a masters degree in music to take care of someone else's child." She never could understand why Gaten dismissed her to marry Sara Kate: "Everybody said [Merlee] was without doubt the prettiest black woman they had ever seen. Merlee thought so, too." There's elderly Miss Katie, whose house is filled with brooms although you can't see any floor, always mortgaging present comfort against future dreams by sending money to every sweepstakes, prize offering and televangelist she can.

Most interesting is Aunt Everleen, the rival mother figure throughout the book. A peach farmer who picks her fruit then sells it at a roadside shed, Everleen is a hard-working woman who cares deeply for her niece. She coaches Clover in spelling and hopes to see her one day in the national spelling bee finals. But much of what she teaches Clover gets bent by the twists in her own character. She has "so much anger all tied up inside her it was pitiful." Resenting that "some fancy woman is marrying into this family," Everleen tries to shape Clover's view of Sara Kate. "Be nice and tell her her cooking tastes real, real good," Everleen advises. "You know how white women are. They want you to brag on 'em all the time. To tell them you love 'em. They don't care whether it's the truth or not. . . . They don't love as hard as we do."

But Sara Kate proves her wrong. We never learn her motivation—she remains beyond Clover's understanding—yet she embodies stability, dignity and devotion, the very qualities so evident in Clover's father. She could hardly have had a less propitious beginning. "A total stranger" to Clover, she is left alone with the child in a town where "there was hardly a woman there who could stand Sara Kate." They insist, "There's something wrong with her. . . . Why else would she take up with a black dude?"

A designer of textile patterns, Sara Kate works at home and acts more and more like a mother. She disciplines Clover, teaches her to paint, stretches out an arm protectively in the car, limits Clover's sweets, fixes her hair, takes her to the doctor and finally refers to Clover as her "daughter." She even buys Clover the purple ten-speed. But by that time, Clover has decided she is glad her father married Sara Kate: "When you live with someone and they aren't mean or nothing they kind of grow on you." Clover finds "a part of me was little by little starting to obey and care for Sara Kate without my even knowing it."

Sanders, herself the daughter of a school principal and from a South Carolina peach-farming family, writes with wit and authority in this unusual gem of a love story. But it has its rough spots. At its best, Clover's narrative voice flows with a spunky charm reminiscent of Toni Cade Bambara, but it is not always consistent; within minutes, the same girl who says, "My daddy's internal injuries were too extensive for them to save him," also observes, "Sara Kate was some kind of bad bruised and cut up." Information sometimes gets introduced heavy-handedly, as when Gatlen relates how he met Sara Kate. We are three-quarters through the book before Clover explains why she has been guilty of irritating tense shifts, although her explanation lends sympathy to this child whose present pain often makes her drop into the past.

But if the surface could stand minor buffing, underneath Sanders provides a warmly engrossing tale for our era of reconstituted families. *Clover* glistens with triumphant affirmation as the bricks slowly slip from the wall separating one survivor of tragic loss from another.