

Buried secrets

In Susan Gregg Gilmore's new southern parable, 12-year-old Leonard buries his neighbors' regrets alongside his own amputated leg.

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue
Published on March 26, 2026

In Review



The Curious Calling of Leonard Bush

By Susan Gregg Gilmore
Blair

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The granddaughter of a preacher, Susan Gregg Gilmore has been fashioning winsome novels on religious themes for well over a decade, each one set in the South, each one endorsed by southern favorite Lee Smith. They are “book club ready,” as Smith says. *Looking for Salvation at the Dairy Queen* (2008) covers recognizable literary territory, mirroring the gentle dramedy of Fannie Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* and Kate DiCamillo’s *Because of Winn-Dixie*. You can see where it comes from and where it is going. Less so with Gilmore’s later works. *The Improper Life of Bezellia Grove* (2010), about a 1960s Nashville debutante who falls for the Black son of a servant, is surprisingly tart. *The Funeral Dress* (2013), a more somber story with more deeply imagined characters, draws on what Gilmore knows of the working poor of Tennessee.

Now she has written a very curious book-length parable. She is becoming a craftier writer, and this novel is as unpredictable as a parable should be.

Leonard, a 12-year-old boy, has lost his leg to infection. He wants to give it a proper send-off at the family’s hilltop cemetery. A cast of characters assembles for a perfectly awful burial service led by a perfectly awful preacher. “He shall not delight in the strength of the horse,” Brother Puckett reads from Psalms, “nor take pleasure in the legs of a man.”

Word of the burial spreads, and as the parable unfolds, each of the characters comes forward with a secret for Leonard to bury. He has moved on from loss admirably, whereas they feel stuck. Children, adults, people he has long known, others he has never met, they all have regrets—a stolen heirloom, a romance novel, a hotel key—which after some hesitation Leonard dutifully inters, reciting that same inane verse.

Leonard would rather be fishing or playing baseball, but he can’t turn away people in need of grace. One penitent, who worked at Oak Ridge on the atomic bomb project, carries a copy of the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* from the day after Hiroshima. “I can’t promise that putting that newspaper in the ground is going to change anything,” Leonard says. “But you’ve suffered long enough, and you’ve come a long way to be here today. Why don’t you let the hilltop swallow your pain?” Not yet out of the eighth grade but already a wise soul, Leonard finds himself pressed into the role of a preacher.

Which does not endear him to Brother Puckett. It’s blasphemy, the man of God declares. If Leonard doesn’t stop, his family will no longer be welcome in the town’s only church. Standing a familiar verse on its head, he says, “I got an entire flock to look after, and if I got to sacrifice one for the many, then so be it.”

We may think we know where this is going, especially because in this parable some of the people are types rather than complex characters. But Gilmore has a few surprises. Leonard’s role doesn’t always bring out the best in people, and burying their secrets doesn’t necessarily bring them grace. Even he questions his curious calling.

A clever writer from the start, Gilmore has become more skillful at dramatizing loneliness. In this book, each chapter comes from one person’s point of view, the better to heighten their secrets. (Just about everyone’s secret resembles someone else’s. Leonard’s father, for example, let his own little sister go barefoot in cold water, where she caught deadly scarlet fever. Leonard cut his foot on broken glass in a cold river.) Readers of Gilmore’s earlier books will recognize the recurrence of unwed mothers, mothers who disappear in mysterious circumstances, and the wise children of all-too-human parents.

This theme of loneliness, curiously enough, dovetails with Gilmore’s interest in people who are called. *Looking for Salvation* is full of preachers, flawed but essentially decent lonely men seen through the eyes of a wise child who finds a calling of her own. *Bezellia Grove*’s preacher may be a scoundrel, but the narrator, another wise

child, chooses a noble path. In *The Funeral Dress*, an unwed mother feels impelled to fashion crosses for everyone who dies in her small town. When church members try to bar her from the funeral of her sole friend, the pastor comes forward with a life-changing act of grace.

Impulses, compulsive behavior, people doing things against their wills that either isolate them or connect them to others: these are Gilmore's obsessive themes. Leonard's father holes himself up in a dairy barn where he holds a toddler's shoe, the only thing left of his sister. Leonard's mother, who for 200 pages seems one of the less sympathetic characters, discovers "her own peculiar calling" when she is impelled to help a neglected child much like the one she was. "Let me in, sweetie," she says. "Can't you see I'm just a grown-up version of you?"

Such obsessive themes suggest a resonance with Gilmore's own story. "As a young woman, guilt was something I did really well. To myself," she once said in an interview. "Being mired in guilt is something I feel very sensitive to. People who find themselves mired in guilt. Characters who find themselves trapped by guilt." Hence this parable about whether grace means burying regrets or dealing with them.

No one is entirely a hero or a villain in Gilmore's fiction. If some of the dialogue is on the nose, that may be for the sake of parable. "Daddy said that Jesus talked in parables because people have a tendency to hear but not to listen. They look but don't see," says the wise child of *Looking for Salvation*. "I guess I was no different than anybody else."

The curious calling of Susan Gregg Gilmore is to write about grace with greater subtlety and specificity than her grandfather likely managed from the pulpit. Indeed, any preacher might want to hand this book to a book club and let Gilmore preach.