

Sweetgirl

Travis Mulhauser

A self-sufficient 16-year-old girl searches for her meth-addicted parent in the deep woods: if that sounds familiar, you probably read Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* (or saw the movie with Jennifer Lawrence in her star-making role), but it also serves as the setup for Mulhauser's debut. As northern Michigan prepares for a blizzard, Percy James knows her mother, Carletta, is strung out somewhere, and local meth cook Shelton Potter's dilapidated cabin is the most obvious candidate for her retrieval. What Percy finds there instead is a screaming baby, left alone in a crib with the window open, while Shelton and the baby's mother lie immobilized in the other room. Plucking the baby she calls "sweetgirl" out of her crib, Percy has only one person to turn to for help: her mother's onetime lover Dale Portis, a lonesome curmudgeon whom Percy considers a second father. Together, they try to find Carletta and get the baby proper medical attention before the storm prevents them from escaping the woods, just as Shelton wakes up and marshals all of his criminal forces to reclaim the child. **VERDICT** Though it never fully escapes the shadow of Woodrell's famous novel, this title boasts fine writing and memorable characters, making it a solid pick for readers who enjoy Woodrell or Tom Franklin.

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