

INTERROGATING PARTIALITY: QUESTIONING AS A PATH TOWARD THE WHOLE TRUTH

a review by Sterling Neill

Carol Baldwin, *Half-Truths*.
Monarch Educational Services,
2025.

STERLING S. NEILL is a budding Southern scholar who completed her BA from Mercer University, and her MA from Georgia State University where she continues to pursue a PhD in literary studies. With her educational background in literature and medicine paired with her position as a secretary for the Emerging Scholars Organization (ESO), an affiliate of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature (SSSL), Sterling has explored a multitude of Southern works, uniquely qualifying her as a Southern literature researcher.

CAROL BALDWIN grew up in Cherry Hill, NJ, and now lives in Charlotte, NC. Her writing began in nonfiction with works like *Friendship Counseling*; *Biblical Foundations for Helping Others* (Zondervan, 1988) and *Teaching the Story: Fiction Writing in Grades 4–8* (Maupin House Publishing, 2008). *Half-Truths*, her first novel, received the 2025 North Carolina AAUW Award for Young Adult Literature.



Fueled by her love of reading and sharing stories, particularly those that help people cope or inform them of nuanced ways to navigate life, Carol Baldwin has released her debut novel, *Half-Truths*, historical fiction set in Tabor City and Charlotte, NC. A novel geared toward Young Adult audiences, *Half-Truths* is reminiscent of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Baldwin's novel follows fifteen-year-old Kate Dinsmore, a budding journalist who is confronted with her own privilege and prejudices when she moves in with her grandmother. With tenacity and curiosity, Kate seeks to uncover her family secrets and to distinguish the truth among lies and omissions. Her grandmother points out, "Another way to describe a 'small lie' is a half-truth," but also that "half-truths are whole lies" (273). *Half-Truths* is ultimately a novel about how familial, social, and societal histories coalesce to create complicated and conflicting futures.

To expose how partial truths cultivate emotional ambiguity, Baldwin embeds a story within a story, allowing inquiry to drive the exposition of the narrative. The first story centers around Kate and her struggle to find herself in her family, social circles, and future career, while the second story focuses on

uncovering and assessing the long-held family secret about her great-grandfather Edward and an enslaved woman, Zula Belle. The first narrative narrows in on Kate's difficulty acclimating to family members she is less familiar with and a new social environment. Her acclimation is hindered by her inability to understand the situations of others. Kate initially has issues distinguishing between genuinely empathizing with those around her and using them for her personal pursuit of her journalism career. Kate wants to be more like her personal idol Mr. Horace Carter, who gave her the advice, "If you aspire to become a journalist, sometimes you must enter worlds that feel uncomfortable" (125). But she struggles with balancing her empathy for those she wishes to help with her desire to find and report an important story: "I want to write about important things people should think about. I want to have a

ABOVE Carol Baldwin (left) receiving the 2025 Young People's Literature Award for YA Literature from Lena Murrill-Chapman, President of AAUW North Carolina, Raleigh, NC, 5 Dec. 2025; courtesy of the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources

voice" (133). Kate's longing to have a voice of her own further complicates how she sees those she wishes to report about. For instance, Kate is unable to perceive the discomfort in the room when she explains to Lillian's parents why she wants to write an article about the local Black funeral home: "I want the students at my school to understand the problems *you people face*" (179; emphasis added).

While the first story follows Kate's struggle to find herself amid a new environment, the second story is shrouded in mystery. The mystique begins when Kate meets her grandmother's maid, a white presenting African American young woman, Lillian. While the seemingly coincidental similarities in appearance between Lillian and Kate are initially overlooked, the material evidence found within her grandmother's old chest makes Kate question their family lineage.

In fact, asking questions is at the heart of this novel. This work positions partial knowledge as the jumping off point for real exploration of how words can actively wonder, unsettle, and open up spaces for communication. To situate the argument that intellectual curiosity is better than complacent closure, Baldwin dictates that half-truths are not benign but, rather, tend to create distortions, omissions, and ultimately silences that craft personal history and memory. Baldwin considers how hiding the truth produces lasting consequences across familial, cultural, and institutional histories and challenges audiences

to consider how partial truths affect their lives.

The novel's insistence on questioning knowledge is exemplified in the discrepancy between Lillian's and Kate's understanding of history. In a conversation about enslavement, Lillian points out that the enslaved did not want or choose to stay with their enslavers, which catches Kate off guard. Kate recounts, "My Social Studies book says slaves chose to stay with their masters. . . . [S]he read the same thing I did" (143). Although they read the same book, Lillian questions and critiques what she read instead of immediately accepting it as fact, as Kate does.

Not only does Baldwin's work critique social and institutionalized knowledge; more generatively it analyzes how telling the whole truth acts as a form of resistance against dominant narratives, distortion, and forgetting. Dominant narratives are often difficult to combat. For example, when Kate seeks information about an old family photograph, an incomplete tea set, and familial slave-owning records, she is met with silence or outright animosity. In one instance when Kate attempts to learn the truth about her family, her grandmother retorts, "In my time, young ladies were raised to be seen and not heard. I would have never pried into my family's business!" (272). Her family members' insistence on silencing, forgetting, or erasing past truths initially prevents Kate from connecting with those around her and prompts her inability to reflect on her own

behavior, further demonstrating the need for constructive conversations founded on truth to build or strengthen connection and create positive change.

Baldwin's novel *Half-Truths* provides a contribution to contemporary literature that melds literary experimentation of inquiry driven narrative with ethical reflection. Additionally, through her narrative Baldwin asserts that ethical reflection is a necessary step for change. Kate's motivation to change not only herself in response to the knowledge she gains about her family but also the minds of others is evident when she states, "I can't change the past. But maybe my article will show that something can be done differently in the future" (197). Her longing for personal and social change is driven by her ability to seek out answers to questions. By crafting a question driven narrative that centers words that wonder, Baldwin challenges readers to consider how stories are made and who has the right to report them. ■



RIGHT Carol Baldwin at her book launch at Park Road Books, Charlotte, NC, 5 April 2025