

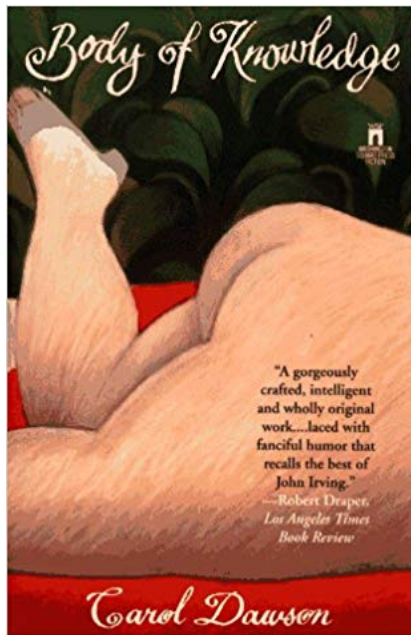
# The Columbus Dispatch

October 2, 1994

**Section:** FEATURES - Accent & Arts

**Edition:** Home Final

**Page:** 06G



## 'KNOWLEDGE' PEERS INSIDE FAMILY'S SOUL

*Nancy McAllister, For The Dispatch*

In her second novel, *Body of Knowledge*, Carol Dawson plunges into a 60-year history of the Ransom family.

A dense, complex work with Gothic undertones, Dawson's book addresses familial history and its effect on subsequent generations as well as communal struggles with good and evil.

The characters are odd and varied, and, when coupled with Dawson's carefully wrought description, they rise up in a world of their own.

The Ransoms live amid the debris of their family saga - and amid the rage and fury of their archenemy, Grant Macafee.

The story is narrated in the sumptuous language of Victoria Grace Ransom, born in 1947 and now the sole surviving member of the once-lofty Ransom clan.

Victoria, a 500-pound virgin who consumes equally enormous amounts of food and family history, is told the voluminous tale by Viola, a loyal family servant. The story begins with Victoria's great-grandfather, Garner Ransom, and his discovery of the pleasures of an icy mint julep on his first business trip away from the East Texas town he has helped establish.

Garner and Archibald Macafee, Grant's father, embark on a wildly successful venture to bring ice to East Texas. After the family fortune is established, Ransom's wife, Arliss, pursues the social standing of the Ransom family name in a hardhearted and heavy-handed manner.

In time, Grant Macafee becomes obsessed with Sarah Ransom, daughter of Garner and Arliss. Sarah discovers that she is pregnant by Grant but refuses to marry him; with Viola's help, she disappears.

An embittered Grant marries Sophie, the love interest of Sarah's brother. Alas, Sophie is already pregnant, though, locking Grant into a lifetime of hatred of the Ransom family. Viola fills Victoria's stomach with Southern delicacies from the kitchen and her mind with the stories of obsession and passion that pepper the Ransom legacy. The grimly comic fallibilities doom Victoria. A prisoner of her own flesh and the words that have created her destiny, she becomes a recluse - the receptacle of the actions of her family's bizarre past.

Dawson skillfully creates her characters with effective and precise prose. She weaves the history of the family with several philosophical meanderings on good and evil. Unfortunately, though, parts of the plot are easily foreseen and solved; Dawson's use of symbolism is a little too obvious to produce the intended results. Nonetheless, *Body of Knowledge* remains intriguing - for its ambitious structure and serious literary intent.

**Nancy McAllister** is a Columbus writer.

Fiction

*Body of Knowledge* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, \$22.95) is a novel by Carol Dawson.