If ever there were a moment of historical contingency for South Carolina, a time when African slavery was an alternative, not a certainty, it would have been before the introduction of rice when the deerskin trade, cattle and hog farming, and the production of naval stores formed the colony's backbone,” John J. Navin reasons in *The Grim Years: Settling South Carolina, 1670-1720* (p. 91). The colony has drawn no shortage of attention from historians seeking to understand the Atlantic world, the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, the foundations of the early American republic, and increasingly, the lives of Indigenous people who called the low country home long before it took on its present name. Among the latest is Navin, who catalogs the often difficult lives led by colonial settlers, enslaved people of African descent, and Native men, women, and children during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Separated into five chapters with an introduction and epilogue, *The Grim Years: Settling South Carolina, 1670-1720* attempts to make the case that the reason for the colony's foundation and continued existence during its first fifty years was largely the pursuit of wealth on the part of Lords Proprietors and planters who gambled on the region's topography and climate to stake their claim to colonial fortune. Of course, Navin points out, this did not happen without the oppression of enslaved Africans and the dispossession of Indigenous lands.

Navin spends much time in the opening chapter describing not South Carolina, but Barbados, explaining that Barbados proved to be the template for successful English colonies in the Caribbean and beyond. However, its climate on the eastern rim of the Caribbean and the labor demands required by planters meant that “from the colony's inception, slavery and involuntary servitude were parts of everyday life on the island” (p. 23). While planters experimented with a number of labor systems, chattel enslavement of Africans and African-descended people emerged as the dominant labor source on the island by the mid-seventeenth century. The arrival of Barbadian planters in Carolina, as chronicled in the book's second chapter, meant that coming with them were attitudes toward African peoples and the systems of labor forced upon them. South Carolina, Navin argues, ultimately became “more an extension of the Caribbean than a typical mainland colony” (p. 106).

It is clear from Navin's work that the colony's elites understood the rigors of slavery and the agency of enslaved people who did attempt to escape their station, at times violently. The strength of *The Grim Years* lies in Navin's ability to demonstrate how fears of slave revolts were codified into
law in colonial Barbados, South Carolina, and beyond. At times, this is also a weakness of the work. Navin layers in discussions of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* throughout the book—in fact beginning with it—which can at times be confusing to the reader. If Navin's aim is to discuss the difficulties of life for the people who founded South Carolina, the top-down approach feels like an awkward mechanism to accomplish such a goal.

Navin is also interested in the lives of poor white settlers recruited and often forced to South Carolina. At his best, he aptly describes the motivations of the Lord Proprietors whose success depended upon their ability to convince lower classes “that their prospects were married to those of the planter elite ... that distress of any kind at the top of society signified disaster at the bottom” (p. 55). Men like Thomas Newe migrated to the new colony in 1682, established homes, worked the land, and died within a year. However, others did succeed, sometimes with help coming from unexpected places, such as the Huguenot community that helped to guarantee the survival of their Protestant neighbors (p. 80).

Less well documented are the lives of Indigenous peoples who called the low country home long before the arrival of English ships—and whose descendants still consider it home today. Navin briefly discusses both the deerskin trade and Indian slave trade, but never fully reckons with how the environmental transformation of South Carolina nor the disastrous trade in Indian bodies affected the lived experience of Native men, women, and children. Navin’s discussion of the Yamasee War that nearly destroyed the nascent colony is topical but probably deserving of more space in a book devoted to the era.

Rice transformed the lives of South Carolini ans, Navin writes, “turning a farm colony into a plantation colony” by 1720 (p. 142). Drawing upon works by scholars such as Judith Carney and Peter H. Wood, *The Grim Years* shows how the adoption of grain enriched wealthy planters while accelerating the colony’s dependence on enslaved African labor. While the riches reaped by planters was finally in line with the plans of the colony’s founders, the regional instability caused by warfare with Indigenous neighbors, epidemics caused by yellow fever and smallpox, and economic instability ultimately convinced the Lord Proprietors to abandon their Carolinian ambitions in 1729.

*The Grim Years* suffers from misdirection, though it is unclear if that comes from the author or the editor. Navin’s claims to call attention “to the intimidation, physical abuse, and unabashed exploitation of slaves in Barbados and South Carolina” (p. 167) work to some degree, though his focus on colonial legislation as a mechanism to tell that tale never quite hits the mark. Navin laments that women are poorly represented in the archives; those vacuums appear in the book as well. Indigenous people of the low country do not receive much attention, either. Aside from a brief discussion on the Indian slave trade and the Yamasee War, little effort is made to discuss how the Barbadian colonization of their lands affected them. While Navin does document some of the hardships of settlers, enslaved people, and Indigenous people during the era, he fails to connect the reader with the historical implications of that suffering. And while credit must be given to the University of South Carolina Press for standing fast to footnotes, the rest of the book feels unwieldy. Readers are treated to one chapter of fifty pages, followed by another of twenty-two, and another of eighteen. The result is a book that makes for uneven reading.

*The Grim Years* does tell of the settling of South Carolina and its relatively short length may find some use in collegiate survey courses, especially those of the Palmetto State. Ultimately, the book works best as an entry point to South Carolina history and a platform for those looking for more detailed analyses of settler colonialism, slavery, or Indigenous resistance and survival.