River of Tears
by Linda Ducharme

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Linda Ducharme’s first adult novel, River of Tears, speaks to modern readers who are used to receiving most of our stories off screens large or small. At 121 pages, this novel is screenplay length, and the first-person narration by a female doctor evokes the television drama Grey’s Anatomy. However, this doctor’s voiceovers are less universally inclusive than Grey’s.

Doctor Doris Kairborn first meets Marguerite Featherchild when she is admitted as a patient. Inexplicably drawn to Meg, Dr. Kairborn refers her to a colleague and attempts to redefine their relationship as friendship. However, the new “friend’s” neediness precludes a relationship of equality. Although there is a mutual exchange, a sharing of past experiences, the patient/friend invites talk therapy while the doctor/friend offers interpretation, lectures on forgiveness and solutions based on her Christian faith.

It is always a challenge to present a story through the eyes of an unreliable, sometimes unattractive, narrator, such as Doris. When she first sees Meg, she sees her in animal images, with “wild monkey eyes” and “bony claws” (7). Even when she encounters Native children, she projects violence and fear—“His black eyes stab me” (12). She sees the reserve as “broken fences lean[ing] drunkenly; some poles are passed out” and the barbed wire “writhes” (11). As the story unwinds, the discrimination experienced generations ago seems to pale next to the prejudice still alive in the protagonist. That’s the way things were back then; we are better than our predecessors, the plot suggests. We hurt people in the past; we help them today. She does not seem to be aware of how her attitude towards a depressed and grieving patient parallels that of the newcomers who held themselves above Aboriginal peoples in a well-meaning yet condescending way.

Cross-cultural communication is always a minefield. No matter what we say, someone is likely to take offence; no matter how good our intentions, someone is likely to misconstrue; no matter how tolerant we consider ourselves to be, someone will point out the inherent racism or sense of superiority or condescension in our premise or concept or execution. As a writer I have experienced such reactions and I expect I will again. The danger is that the risks inherent in attempting stories of contact may lead
us to self-censor, or to be censored, or to be denied publication because of race. Yet this important cultural issue must not be avoided. When we write about groups to which we do not belong, how can we ensure that our characters are presented, well-drawn, as individuals, received as individuals, and critiqued as individuals? How can we train ourselves to comb our “individual” characters for generalizations and stereotypes that could be “misread” by an ungenerous or unsophisticated reader? For example, if we read Meg not as an individual old woman or even as an “old-woman archetype” but rather as a “symbol” of First Nations people, what do we see? An abused victim immobilized by grief who, in an unconvincing “friendship” with a white lady doctor, is taught that if she just learns to think the way I do and to believe as I do, she will be fine. How is this any different from the racism of the past, of the Indian Act and the residential school system and the Potlatch Laws? Is River of Tears bibliotherapy, or is it a book that could have used a bit more editorial treatment?

The characters in River of Tears can be seen as more symbolic than real, with the doctor/narrator representing a dominant culture that still has much to learn about cross-cultural relations. The premise of the friendship is somewhat unconvincing. The plot relies heavily on coincidence. The setting is too non-specific, neither here (reserve) nor there (reservations). On another level, River of Tears is really a story about collective guilt, about how much of us is responsible for the sins of our fathers, specific or general. It is also a story about the benefits of forgiving the abuser, about liberating ourselves from the burdens of the past, and about offering a hand of friendship to damaged and grieving others. It is a story about abandoning prejudice and judgement and unlocking empathy in our hearts. It is commendable for the risks it takes in these uncertain days before truth and reconciliation.

J. M. Bridgeman writes from BC’s Fraser Valley.
jmbridgeman@uniserve.com

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