This Innocent Corner
by Peggy Herring

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

This Innocent Corner is an excellent first novel by Peggy Herring of Victoria, BC. In two distinct sections the reader delves into the thoughts and actions of Robin Rowe, and what the consequences from these have been.

The first half of the novel covers the time that Robin, a university student from Lansing, Michigan, travels in 1970 to East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) as an exchange student at Dhaka University. While there, she lives with the Chowdhurys, apparently a fairly well-to-do family with a couple of servants. The historical setting is the early days of the Bangladesh struggle for independence. The country had been under martial law for 12 years, with the promised elections and new constitution constantly postponed. The movement for autonomy simmered and eventually erupts into violence about the time Robin is forced to return home.

While there, Robin is intrigued by the political manoeuvring but doesn’t really understand it, and the Chowdhurys prefer not to explain things to an American, because they believe America is more sympathetic to West Pakistan. Robin finds it difficult to accept the societal differences of the region, particularly the way in which the females’ lives are controlled by male family members. For example, Robin and 19-year-old Luna Chowdhury are usually chaperoned by Luna’s brother, Hasan.

Naive, stubborn and somewhat thoughtless, Robin tries to get Luna to accept western ideas, including the idea of marrying for love rather than agreeing to an arranged marriage. Luna is in love with Razzak, an “unacceptable” Bihari, and Robin encourages her to run away with the young man, about the same time as Robin will fly home. Due to the subsequent eruption of violence – in which it is said that up to three million people died – Robin completely loses touch with the Chowdhury family and is unaware of the tragic consequences of her meddling.

The second half of the novel jumps forward 30 years to 2001. Fifty-year-old Robin is now a widow, her husband, Graham, having died 10 years previously. Graham had been a draft dodger during the Vietnam War, and the couple lived first in Ontario and then in Vancouver. Their daughter, Surinder, is estranged from Robin. Surinder lives in Toronto, while Robin lives on Saltspring Island in a broken-down old stone schoolhouse.

A brief trip to Bangladesh in 2001 brings some awareness to Robin of the troubles her meddling has caused. She does, however, finally begin to feel some guilt over it, although she still thinks her actions were correct and should have been accepted by the Chowdhurys.

I enjoyed both time slots of this novel. The Bangladesh section was particularly intriguing, with details of life there in 1970 – including the class system, clothing, foods, weddings, the political upheavals and so on. I wish the author had included a few more descriptive details of Dhaka and the surrounding countryside, as these are rather sparse.

There were a few rather unrealistic occurrences. I was surprised that young Robin stayed quite so long in East Pakistan, when violence was threatening. I was also surprised that she did not make more of an effort in the intervening 30 years to contact the Chowdhury family or other friends there, or to return the Chowdhurys’ box of possessions, which she had taken away with her for safekeeping.
But this does seem typical of Robin’s character, for she prefers to wait things out, to let things drift, rather than to act. In fact, one friend accuses her of living with her eyes shut. Only gradually does Robin start to realize that having the best of intentions is not enough, and that all of us are engaged in wars of one type or another, against injustices or social rules, against death or even against those we love.

Herring writes skillfully. She frequently leads the reader to wonder why Robin acted in certain ways – for instance, not attending her own father’s funeral – and only gradually does she reveal the backstory to show us why.

Herring makes good use of her own background in This Innocent Corner, for she has lived and worked in southeast Asia. Her next novel will be based on the story of a teenage Russian refugee in the 1960s, as he grows up in rural Ontario. I’ll be watching for it.

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is Sarah: A New Beginning, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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