For a Modest Fee
by Freda Jackson

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

For a Modest Fee is a story of the Alberta prairies in 1907–08 and the people who live there. Set in the fictional town of Aspen Coulee, somewhere not too distant from Calgary and Red Deer, it is mainly the story of two women, Elizabeth Evans and Ann Montgomery. Elizabeth’s father had come there in 1906 to become the town’s doctor, and Elizabeth, trained as a nurse and midwife, had reluctantly left Toronto and come with him as his assistant. But in the summer of 1907, her father suddenly dies, leaving Elizabeth in a precarious financial situation. She has been left with a large house and plenty of medical supplies, but little else. Reluctantly she decides to use her training to help out the town, until perhaps she can sell the house and return to eastern Canada. She will offer her services as a nurse and midwife “for a modest fee.”

Ann Montgomery is a woman of secretive background, a widow who had arrived in Aspen Coulee about the same time as the doctor, having fled California after the San Francisco earthquake. Ann had been hired as the doctor’s housekeeper but with his death, her future is also uncertain, for her savings will soon run out. When the opportunity arises to act as a housekeeper/assistant to Elizabeth, she jumps at the chance, though she views her new employer as a pampered little girl. Gradually the two women become friends. Ann learns many of the nurse’s skills and comes to admire the woman’s courage and determination to try to improve conditions in Aspen Coulee.

The author also uses several other viewpoints, including those of Herbert Schneider, the greedy hotel owner and “ overseer” of Aspen Coulee, who has designs on buying up more land and making a lot of money; his wife, Beatrice, who hates the prairies, is jealous of Elizabeth’s fine house, and extremely fearful of getting pregnant; and Stefan Gregorowicz, who is a talented violinist but has reluctantly come with his parents and brother’s family to help them take up a homestead in the area, only to have his brother die soon after their arrival.

Author Freda Jackson tells a good story. She skilfully works in many details about the practicalities and dangers of early pioneer life. There is information on how to file a claim for homestead land and the problems immigrants faced squatting on railroad land while they earned money to be able to take up a homestead and build a dwelling. There’s a train derailment and a typhoid epidemic – both of which test Elizabeth’s knowledge and skills. There are also typical prairie emergencies such as blizzards and grass fires. The descriptions of the Alberta prairies are well done, as are the varying reactions to life in an isolated community where one must learn to be independent and resourceful. Underlying themes include gender equality, or the lack of it, as well as the racial prejudice shown against Aboriginals and against some of the “foreign” immigrants.

I found that there were perhaps too many viewpoints; some thoughts and perspectives could have been shown through conversations with the principal characters. There seemed to be a lot of people to keep track of, a situation not helped by the similarity of a few names, e.g., Herbert and Hepburn, Beatrice and Bertha.
Also, there is one thing that is not really explained. In the beginning Ann views Elizabeth as “a pampered little girl,” and many of the townspeople also don’t have a high opinion of her. However, we are given little reason for this. Elizabeth seems to have considerable skill and knowledge and had been helping her father before his death, so why she was viewed so negatively – especially by Ann – doesn’t seem right. Overall, however, I enjoyed this book and recommend it to those who like historical stories.

For a Modest Fee is Jackson’s second novel. Her first, Searching for Billie, was set in 1897 and based on the immigration to western Canada of “Home Children.” Apparently a third novel is now in the works. ♣

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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