The Sentimentalists
by Johanna Skibsrud

Reviewed by Dave Williamson

The Sentimentalists was a surprise winner of the 2010 Scotiabank Giller Prize, presented annually to the best work of Canadian fiction. It is a first novel by Johanna Skibsrud, a Nova Scotian whose only previous book was a collection of poetry.

The novel concerns a young woman about the age of Skibsrud (30 in 2010) who seeks to know more about her father’s past life and particularly his time in the Vietnam War. He is Napoleon Haskell, but her first name is never revealed. Most of the story is narrated by her after Napoleon has died.

Napoleon left his family to find work in Alberta and BC. His wife and two daughters moved from the town of Mexico, Maine, to the grandmother’s house in Orono. Napoleon ended up in Fargo, North Dakota, and he’s ailing when, in the present of the story (2008?), the narrator and her sister Helen go there to move him to the home of old Henry Carey in Casablanca, Ontario. (The Maine towns are real; Casablanca is fictitious.)

Henry’s house had to be relocated because of the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway, and a resulting lake covers his old house – a kind of metaphor for hidden truths and forgotten facts.

Napoleon befriended Henry years earlier, seeking him out because Henry’s son Owen was one of Napoleon’s buddies in the war. As we learn later, Owen died in the war, likely in a controversial skirmish that became the subject of a military investigation.

The Haskell girls and their mother got into the habit of visiting Henry every summer, even after Napoleon left. Once Napoleon is ensconced there, the daughters visit him. We learn little of their lives in the United States, though Helen has a daughter, Sophia. The narrator is somewhat in limbo “after stumbling upon the man who for six years I had been intending to marry as he made love to another woman” (48). That’s about the only personal detail Skibsrud gives, though the reader is bound to wish for more.

Napoleon had ways of charming his wife; before leaving her, he, who considered himself a carpenter, spent most of his time building a boat and conjured up dreams for her of the two of them sailing off the eastern shore of Maine. When he left her, he abandoned the boat project.

It’s hinted that his erratic behaviour and excessive drinking – prior to going teetotal in Fargo – is a direct result of his Vietnam experience. Yet the only reference the narrator recalls her mother making to it was in a phone call to him from Poland, Maine. She said: “The war can’t explain you forever, you know. I think you should be gone by the time we get home.” Accordingly, then, my father had packed his belongings and headed west.” (33)

Only brief references are made to the war prior to the narrator’s finally asking Napoleon about it halfway through the novel. By then, she suspects that he is dying.

Napoleon’s answers are evasive. When she wants him to talk about Owen, he chooses to talk about his own older brother Clark. He finally does touch on the October 1967 event that led to his being sent home, but details are so sketchy, his daughter speculates on whether his memories are distorted by illness or time, or simply the result of too many past face-saving fabrications.
The novel winds down with a transcript of Napoleon’s testimony from a formal investigation. The transcript leaves the reader no wiser about what actually happened.

The narrator sums up: “[I] think that the emphasis has been, through the wrong-way-round field glasses of time, reversed somehow. And that the actions that did or did not take place that night are somewhat sideways to the real story – just as the events of my father’s life have been, I believe, somewhat sideways to himself. To the true story, that is, of his life: the one I would have liked to have written.” (215)

Is this a cop-out or is it Skibsrud’s main point, that any documentation of a life will be faulty because of unreliable or damaged memory? Much of the vagueness of this book is rather maddening.

No less disconcerting are the lapses in grammar – lay instead of laid, I instead of me, forgot instead of forgotten, went instead of gone, an unnecessary to after to which I was able to compare them.

There is no strong narrative pull; the story lurches around confusingly. Some brief scenes – four soldiers passing a joint around, a boatride over the submerged old town, going through Customs at the border – are memorable, but the dialogue is mostly quite banal. None of the characters is developed enough to be considered strong or colourful, though a note from the author tells us that Napoleon is based on Skibsrud’s father.

Perhaps the most intriguing thing about this novel is, Why did it win the Giller? In its citation, the jury said, “The Sentimentalists charts the painful search by a dutiful daughter to learn – and more importantly, to learn to understand – the multi-layered truth which lies at the moral core of her dying father’s life.”

Regardless of whether the reader agrees with the jury, a young author has been catapulted onto the CanLit A-list with a trophy and a $50,000 prize. Everyone who cheers for underdogs should be ecstatic.

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg novelist and reviewer.

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