

The Time We All Went Marching

by Arley McNeney

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Reviewed by Mary Barnes

Arley McNeney's first novel, *Post*, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Her second novel, *The Time We All Went Marching*, is set during the Great Depression, a time of great disparity and instability. McNeney blends fact with fiction to connect us to Edie Macdonald's world, which is also full of disorder and confusion.

It is a time in history when people are out of work. Whole families begin a migration across the country, taking to the roads or the rails in search of a better life. The author tells of a rise in militancy as labour forces form unions, their leaders speaking at rallies, raising their voices in protest and demanding from the government a solution to the dilemma.

Amidst this turmoil, Edie awakens one morning to find the pipes have burst in the apartment where she lives with her husband, Slim, and son, Belly. She takes the axe and cuts through the ice that has formed in the night, smashing everything in sight. Then she takes Belly out for breakfast. Upon their return, she finds Slim lying in a drunken stupor on their bed. Deciding she has had enough, Edie and Belly leave Slim in their icy apartment on the coldest day of the year – "She is gone from a man who for ten years was as straight and hard in her life as a spine" (12).

Boarding a train, she and Belly begin their trip westward. They encounter a snowstorm, there is an accident, and the passengers disembark and take refuge in a nearby rural town. During the interval, Edie takes time to consider her life so far. She goes into the dark tunnels of mines where women are not allowed but, disguised in baggy clothes, she follows Slim into their dark recesses; she relives the work camps where they stayed in houses where "houses are not houses anymore," where there are "walls green with moss and carpets that are lush with weeds, the down of dandelions" (58). Nothing is as it once was.

As we take the inward journey with Edie, we hear her ask herself, should she leave Belly with his grandmother and return to Slim despite his heavy drinking? McNeney's portrayal of an unstable time is reflected in the inconsistencies in her character's life. We discover Edie is not new to untrustworthiness. In one instance, the author draws a startling scene in which she listens to her father's story of the Easter Bunny: "Bad news . . . I ran over the Easter Bunny on the way from work." (87) The father wanders in and out of their lives, and so his statement only sets Edie and her siblings to crying. Then he laughs and gives them four chocolate bunnies. He is a maker of stories, and it isn't long before Edie becomes one, her storytelling continuing until fact and fiction blur. Most of Slim's stories and those of others they meet during their travelling are seen through Edie's eyes. And just as Belly makes up stories while playing, we soon discover that many of Edie's stories are of her own making. She becomes the unreliable narrator, and as such shows us the impermanence of life and its changeability

Then there is young Belly. We become acquainted with his world of make-believe as he plays with his toy soldiers, but in the back of his mind is the terrible uncertainty that his mother will disappear, that she will not be there for him. In a hotel where they have taken refuge from the accident and where he is recovering from a wound, he awakes to find "[h]is mom is not here. . . . Outside there is a long hallway with many doors. . . . He cannot even imagine where his mother might have gone" (165).

Told in episodes, the stories resemble a collage of photographs. We see glimpses of the characters roaming back and forth in time trying to understand their situation; of Edie's and Slim's life together, of Edie's and Belly's journeys; of the men caught up in the On to Ottawa Trek.

I enjoyed reading this book, the episodic flight of Edie's imagination, and Belly's too. I liked the idea of the author creating a real world with powerful images. In light of the unrest in the 21st century, the Occupy movement, and the anxiety with the economy, McNeney's novel not only entertains but also echoes an era relevant to our own. ♡

Mary Barnes is a writer living in Wasaga Beach, Ontario.

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