The Gate: a story of love and war
by Michael Elcock

Reviewed by Mary Barnes

Sometimes, it takes long for a wound to heal – in some instances more than one lifetime. And does a wound get smaller with each opening and scarring? Is that how healing works, until the wound disappears altogether, and is the scar a reminder that we should never forget the cause of its existence, especially in the circumstance of war? These are some of the questions that arise in the reading Michael Elcock’s book, The Gate.

The author of two books of non-fiction, Elcock makes his first excursion into fiction with The Gate, a book long-listed for the 2011 Scotiabank Giller Prize.

Based on the massacre that took place at Bande on Christmas Eve 1944, Elcock’s story is one of love, war and betrayal, a book filled with intrigue and tension. Beneath the story is the recurring and significant motif of pain, first mentioned in the letter Etienne reads: “Sometimes he still feels pain, but his hands and feet have healed well” (20). What is this pain and why is Etienne, then a small child, experiencing it?

The book begins with Etienne Rochefort returning to his childhood home of Pemberton Meadows in British Columbia. His grandmother is dying and she wants to speak to him on a family matter.

During the visit, she tells him about his mother, Marie. She also gives him a letter. What it reveals is so disturbing that he says: “I sit out in the night for a long time” (21). His mother has always been a mysterious figure to him, for he believed she died giving birth to him. Now he realizes that she died somewhere in Europe during the Second World War. When he returns to Vancouver he is unable to concentrate on his work and is abrupt with fellow workers. At the suggestion of his business partner, Nick, he takes a vacation and flies to Europe.

Soon after he arrives in Cologne, Etienne meets a war veteran who makes his living as a street artist. This encounter leaves Etienne shaken and it is this experience that prompts him to find out more about his mother and father. He journeys to the remote village of Grune in the Belgian countryside. There he meets Jacques Chabrier and his wife, Françoise. Under the spell of Jacques’s voice, Etienne discovers the truth about his parents, Pascal and Marie, and Pascal’s connection with the Resistance.

Elcock is meticulous with details concerning the events of the massacre, even including a map that guides the reader through the area depicted. He avoids romanticism in the telling of his story, but that is not to say he isn't passionate about what he writes. Time and again the author writes with fervour about the depravity of the Gestapo and the Sicherheitsdienst and their heinous acts; he writes of the retribution sought by individuals who suffered at the hands of the secret police and their collaborators. In one instance, I had to set aside my disbelief and accept that a certain horrific detail did occur, that humans can be without conscience.

But amid the horrors there are moments of beauty, kindnesses and understanding, and the author intertwines these into the book, thus creating a multifaceted story. This occurs in the gentleness of Inge, the old woman of the forest Pascal befriends in the time of his madness: after he “raked his face with his fingernails, drawing blood... Inge took a pair of scissors while he was asleep, and cut his fingernails down to the quick” (133).
On another occasion Pascal is staying at the farm of Albert and, though the stay is temporary, he comes to enjoy the peace the place exudes. A dog named Lac follows him around when he does the chores: “Lac had one black eye and one white eye and it gave her a comical look. . . . They became friends, and Albert saw that the dog was awakening something in Pascal, and understood” (145). When Pascal tells the Abbé his heartbreaking story, the Abbé “shook himself like a small dog which has been caught in a spray of a garden hose; half shiver, half shake” (140–141).

These flashes are scenes of concord and empathy. Elcock’s writing illustrates an emotional and enthusiastic expression of what stuff humans are capable of in moments of quiet solitude; that there are such things as goodwill and harmony. I would like to think the author is saying that, though they are not forgotten, the wounds of war can heal, that the human spirit has room for beauty, love and wisdom.  

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

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