The Year of Broken Glass
by Joe Denham

Reviewed by Mary Barnes

The drawing on the cover is a fine one, reminiscent of mysteries and legends; the title, The Year of Broken Glass, is intriguing, and I am eager to begin the book. What story waits behind that cover and what words dance on the pages within?

Francis “Ferris” Wichbaum/Wishbone is a fisherman, catching crab in the waters off Halfmoon Bay. A recovering alcoholic, Ferris leads two lives, one with Anna and their son, Willow, and the other across town in South Vancouver with Jin Sui and their daughter, Emily. Ferris can’t seem to make up his mind where he belongs but he is a man grappling with his life and this premise is enough to draw me in.

Ferris doesn’t like crabbing, but it is an earning and he needs to support his two families. On one of his trap inspections, he discovers a glass float and retrieves it, fascinated by it, for: “It’s of the lightest blue and opalescent like oil, and as the orb of it bobs on the rippling water a rainbow of colour seems to swirl upon its inner surface” (20).

Ferris travels with two friends to Tofino, where they find Miriam Maynard, who relates the history of the glass fishing floats. In the ensuing conversation, she suggests that the float Ferris found may be rare and therefore valuable. Miriam also tells a fascinating tale of Sohqui (sew-key), a mythical creature that swallowed a glass float. Subsequently, the creature is speared by a fisherman, and that fisherman and all his descendants are doomed until the float is found and destroyed, the pieces cast into the path of Mauna Kea for the survival of the earth. Thinking he may have this particular float and lured by the promise of money which he needs, Ferris sets out on a journey.

Denham’s aim to depict fragmented lives in a world split adunder by human carelessness is admirable but somehow the story loses its spontaneity and its focus when Ferris disappears off the pages. The novel jumps around too much and the author tends to force pieces together rather than allow the story to flow to its own conclusion.

The author introduces other characters, each with a point of view. I wanted to empathize with them but they seemed inaccessible. Anna comes across as a strong woman but we see only her negativity; Jin Sui is almost non-existent for a main character that plays a huge part in Ferris’s life, and there is far too much of Miriam. In the long run, too many characters are not fully realized and the result is a mediocre book. Their voices become intrusive and lead the story astray – I kept looking for Ferris.

Reading further, I sensed that there was more to Ferris than the drinking, vomiting, pissing character so clearly portrayed. Getting close to him was difficult because the author veered off to another character or used the story as a platform for environmental issues. Such issues are important but they can bring confusion to the story if too much information is thrown at the reader.

In a novel, the character does not have to descend from the sky wearing a cape and mask. But he must come, be brave when we least expect it, connect and touch us with his heart. Denham’s story ends in a hackneyed TV drama with guns and subterfuge. True, a reader likes action, but action can be achieved without espionage; characters can have challenges and conflicts without the use of guns and pandemonium. Consider the dialogue between Anna and Jin Sui. Jin Sui is aware of Anna but Anna does not know of Jin Sui in Ferris’s life. The scene is fraught with tension.
What is good is Denham’s writing; his experience as a poet and the lyrical quality of his writing bring bright moments to the story: “Dawn’s a different blue, huddled, dark, and it’s sifting in through the white cotton curtains” (13) and “the sun comes beaming over the dark mountains, speckling down across the water like the sea is made of countless flecks of glass, each one holding the light” (323); they add sparkle. Also, Denham’s careful research gives authenticity to the book – the details of the fishing industry are believable, and it was a delight to read about the environmental issues, the sheer number of them were a bit overwhelming for one novel.

Books can provide lessons and Denham’s has done so by saying if we do not care for our world it will die and humans along with it. The story he created is there, albeit in fragmented form; it would have benefited from a paring down rather than an inclusion of all the trappings. Less is better. What I missed was the magic a novel can impart, the magic Nabokov once wrote of that makes the spine tingle, that makes you sit up and say, “Yes!”

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

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