Blood and Salt
by Barbara Sapergia

Reviewed by Dave Williamson

In 1915, at the time of the First World War, the Canadian government rounded up male Ukrainian immigrants and placed them in camps. Because Austria had taken over Ukraine and because Canada was now at war with Austria, these men were regarded as enemy aliens.

In her last novel, Dry (2005), Saskatoon novelist and playwright Barbara Sapergia looked ahead to 2023 and envisaged an epic drought brought on by accelerated global warming. Now, in Blood and Salt, she looks back, taking us into one of those internment camps located near Banff, Alberta.

While exposing a shameful situation little known or understood by today’s generation of Canadians, Sapergia presents a classic love story, one as moving as the best nineteenth-century sagas.

Her main protagonist, Taras Kalyna, has emigrated from the Old Country to Saskatchewan, pursuing the love of his life, Halya Dubrovsky. There is one impediment: Halya’s father Viktor hates Taras for reasons not at first divulged. Taras has avoided being called up for Austrian military duty, only to be arrested in Canada before he ever gets in touch with Halya.

The novel begins with Taras and many young men like him being taken by train to a work camp in Alberta. Unsure of why they are being treated this way – they regard themselves after all as peace-loving Ukrainians – the men are herded into camp by Canadian soldiers.

As winter approaches, they are forced to do hard labour and endure appalling living conditions: cold quarters, inappropriate clothing and terrible food: “The evening meal is thin stew with shreds of stringy beef floating on top, and chunks of rubbery cabbage. And a slice of dry bread with coffee that tastes like charred wood. . . . After the beef and bread comes a dense yellow pudding in which Taras finds three rock-hard raisins that look like small, charred beetles. He eats it all; still hunger gnaws his stomach.” (17)

Though tempted to try to escape, the men resign themselves to succumbing, partly because they believe the Canadian government will one day either show compassion or see the whole operation as a mistake. Conditions worsen. A commander bent on saving expenses trumps any hope gained from some guards growing friendly.

As Taras and others – Ihor the Mountain Man, Tymko the Socialist, Myro the Professor, Yuriy the Farmer and Bohdan the Carver – become close friends, they crave entertainment. Taras is coaxed into telling stories of the Old Country; author Sapergia uses this device to fill in much of the background of the novel.

Sometimes, the storytelling changes to philosophical discussion, where basic questions of human society are raised. “Why do [people] have different religions and ideas, Bohdan asks, and Ihor demands to know, ‘Why do some people think they’re better than others?’” (184) Sapergia suggests that finding answers to such questions would do a lot to improve international relations, but how can we ever find answers when we do outrageous things like imprisoning innocent people?

All this is pervaded by the spirit of poet and painter Taras Shevchenko, a nineteenth-century Ukrainian patriot who worked to make Ukraine a free state and to abolish serfdom. Talking about him helps keep the internees’ hopes alive. “Shevchenko is their heart. Ardent, striving, damaged, but in some ways still free.” (215) (Shevchenko’s universal appeal is reflected in the fact that there is a monument commemorating him on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislature.)
Meanwhile, hope fades that Halya and Taras will ever see each other again. Halya is led by her father to believe that Taras is dead, while Taras hears that Halya has married a landlord.

Sapergia offers more than enough drama – fights among the internees, severe punishment for unruly ones, Halya’s being sent to an Edmonton school to be made more English – to keep her novel from becoming a polemic. She does follow history in moving her story of the internment atrocity to its conclusion.

Blood and Salt is an exceptional achievement, complete with a love-story denouement that will satisfy romantics. ♦

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg writer whose latest books, both published in 2012, are Dating: A Novel and Changing People’s Lives: An Illustrated History of Red River College.

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