

The Age of Hope

by David Bergen

Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2012, ISBN 978-1-44341-135-6, 287 pp., \$21.99 paper.

Reviewed by John Toews

Hope Plett, the protagonist of David Bergen's seventh novel, *The Age of Hope*, makes her first appearance at the tail end of a misguided attempt at aerial daredevilry. This incident leaves the pilot, a potential suitor, dead, and Hope saddened but not overly put out. She is a woman in possession of "an interesting story, one of romance cut short" (2), but not one defined by it.

This explosive opening is a deliberately atypical occurrence in the otherwise narratively linear life of Hope. She prides herself on her sensible nature and trusts that it, coupled with her striking appearance, will allow her to be one of the "lucky few" who realize her mother's essentials: "find something that you love doing, and find someone whom you enjoy spending time with because you're going to be with him till you die" (5).

Hope finds the latter in Roy Koop, a charismatic car salesman she encounters in Sunday school. She is invigorated by his handsome presence, personal drive and appearance of worldliness, happily falling into his arms. Despite her enchantment with Roy, an anterior sense of dissatisfaction is already beginning to make itself felt as Hope considers married life.

When she assumes the title of "Hope Koop" she becomes a woman penned in by her own name. The arrival of children at first lessens, and finally deepens this situation when their fourth child is born. She compares herself to "a prisoner knocking on the wall of a dungeon" (77). The ticking of her clock is tortuous; the act of child-rearing is infused with a "plodding heaviness" (84). Even Roy's wisdom, so reliable to begin with, is "beginning to smell of indifference" (55).

Hope feels envious of another resident of Eden who has suffered a mental breakdown, now "by herself, in a room, with no one making any demands" (85). Others' estimation of her character and success as a wife and mother weigh heavy on her. Hope's own breakdown, when it comes, is no longer "an adventure . . . something out of the ordinary" (35), but her institutionalization is a temporary relief for responsibility. Rather than recharging her, it becomes an experience she finds difficult to take ownership of, the Hope that experienced the breakdown dismissed as "some other person who wasn't well" (97). She re-enters her house as a stranger.

Hope feels simultaneously envious and frightened of the freedom afforded her worldly friend Emily once she leaves her own husband, abandoning the unchanging world of Eden for the streets of Winnipeg. She later experiences this shift directly when Roy's business fails, forcing them to take a small apartment in the city across from the Legislative Building. This is but one adverse set of circumstances that Hope encounters throughout the novel – a tale that also encompasses a child abduction and a daughter lured into a religious cult; unexpected death and unforeseen love cut short.

Rather than opening up her world, these incidents instead shift and refocus her standard preoccupations, leaving the reader as a rock skipping across the surface of Hope's life, breaking the surface ever so slightly only to fly back into the air without ever plunging into its depths. This reflective woman, so enigmatic at the beginning of the novel despite her "plain life, full of both poverty and pride" (2), remains a mystery to us at its close.

The novel is permeated with Bergen's warm yet dry wit, and with understated poetic turns of phrase. He revels in gracefully deployed tropes – great change is predicated by the threat of rain – yet there are no pyrotechnics – the storm in the distance is a massing of clouds rather than a deluge. In the end, we find ourselves simply at the close of Hope's journey standing resolutely by her side. This might be why the lack of revelation is entirely appropriate. The rhythm of adulthood is maintained. Self-awareness comes as it will – unpredictably and immeasurably, the inevitable conclusion of any life.

Just as Hope sees neither the beginning nor the end of the ill-fated flight that would serve as a standard framing device for any other protagonist's story, so too do we stand at the heart of her family's tale, witnessing neither its outset nor its ramifications, be they catastrophic, affecting, or merely habitual.

In Hope Koop (nee Plett) Bergen has created an unassuming protagonist with a rich inner life. She is a character who declaims her ordinary existence as one well deserving of examination, but at the book's close the feeling remains that it is one from which we might request just a little more disclosure. ♡

John Toews sets up microphones and occasionally interacts with the general public at McNally Robinson Booksellers. He lives with his family in Wolseley.

Buy *The Age of Hope* at McNally Robinson Booksellers:

<http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9781443411363/david-bergen/age-hope?bInBKM=1#.UUdOzI4rhzU>