

The Eve of War

HELEN RODNEY

Parade on an Empty Street, Margaret Drury Gane. Clark, Irwin and Company Limited, 1978. 219 pp. \$10.95 ISBN 0-7720-1169-9.

Margaret Drury Gane's novel *Parade on an Empty Street* is classic in structure: prologue, set in the hero's present, adult life; flashback by the usual Proustian device to the past, where the story unfolds in 25 untitled chapters divided into two sections, each headed by a self-consciously appropriate quote from two modern poets; and epilogue, where the novel returns to the hero's present for its conclusion.

This structure confuses the reader and tells against the book; it puts in doubt what ought to be clear from the start: for whom the novel was written. Without the prologue and epilogue, we might assume an intended audience of thoughtful sixteen-year-olds, perhaps; with prologue and epilogue, we assume an audience of adults – adults who were children during the period in which the book is set. It seems to me unlikely that any child of the hero's age (11-12) would stick with the prologue or enjoy the often stiff and clichéd imagery: "(. . .) the air was heavy and golden with heat" (p. 10); "amber caution" (p. 21); "raking through the past to unearth a nugget that made the present bearable" (p. 185). This is a pity, for the novel has something worthwhile to say, and is not in other aspects unsuccessful.

The plot, clearly developed by the author, is classic, if not stereotyped: at the turning point between childhood and adolescence, a boy meets a girl, and the meeting changes his awareness of himself and of the world: "Shirley's door claims my mind as it always did, for she is part of my childhood, and a past we shared so strangely . . . Shirley touched my life before much had made it memorable, and it is this that now comes crowding back" (p. 3). This rather obvious approach is, however, expressed in skilful dialogue and characterization, and a more subtle message underlies the plot.

Keith, who is both hero and narrator, is a real hockey-playing, hot-dog-eating Canadian boy; his brothers, sketched more briefly, are equally real; his father, whose role in the novel is secondary, remains a cardboard figure, "told" rather than "shown"; but Keith's various aunts are devastatingly true to life. The most lovingly and carefully drawn character in the book, however, is Keith's mother: "She has

very young skin, permanently rouged by hours of ironing and cooking and carrying things up and down" (p. 111). She is a flesh and blood mother, archetypal but real. The remaining characters, essential though they are to the plot, do not come to life in the same way. Shirley, the girl who changes Keith's life, remains a fairy-tale "Rapunzel"; her fearsome grandmother is never more – nor less – than a "dragon", and Durham, the childhood friend of Keith's mother, for all his troubling catalytic effect on the family, and on Keith in particular, remains the itinerant magician, the outcome of whose spells can only be evaluated after his departure.

The link between all these characters symbolized by the references (though slight and unemphasized) to the declaration of war in 1939, is the need for freedom. Will Keith's mother succumb to Durham's charm and abandon her family to follow him? Will Shirley be able to free herself from the tyranny of her Grandmother and her past? How will Keith cut free from his own childhood? The working out of these questions, against the remote background of the great fight for freedom about to begin, is what the novel portrays; with, behind the struggle, the spectre of how Shirley's father cut loose from *his* dragon Mother: a squalid, tragic story, gradually disclosed, and with it the echo of that other past struggle for freedom, the first Great War.

The title of the book sums up the question posed: Keith parades on the empty evening street, playing all the games his watching Rapunzel is not free to play; and the boy soldiers parade towards a battle not yet begun: "the streetcars had stopped and the people within had leaned out the windows to wave and cheer at the wind-swept, chill-fingered band" (p. 160).

It is a pity that Margaret Drury Gane did not develop the image of the war to advantage, as she might have done with effect to heighten, for example, the tension and anguish of that occasional awareness of the passage of time, of the inexorable movement from one state of being to another which the novel is attempting to portray.

It is equally unfortunate that she was unable to avoid a number of stereotypes, the most obvious being that only the male characters are free: Keith frees himself from a childhood naturally dominated by his Mother; she, however, chooses her family rather than Durham, she who might have become a concert pianist if she had followed her adolescent love for him. Durham, though unhappy, is free to follow his destiny as a painter. Shirley, in the end (and this is another reason why the epilogue remains an unsatisfactory appendage) never entirely frees herself, never entirely enters adult life. Even among the minor

characters it is a man – the only teacher shown to be dynamic and free of prejudice – who most influences and encourages Keith.

This is not a great novel. It contains a number of interesting ideas and some excellently-written passages, but does not avoid self-consciousness or banality; and so in the end it is not the resolution of the plot, nor the transmission of the message which come across most clearly. Instead, it is that certain reality – Toronto in the summer and autumn of 1939, Eaton's annex dresses, Sunnyside, Mackenzie King's voice on the radio – a reality the author lived through as a child, of a specific time, place, and social class, which leaves an autumnal Canadian savour in the reader's mind. This already is much.

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The Holocaust – From the Inside

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One Who Came Back, Anita Mayer. Oberon Press, 1981. 110 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88750-3829 hardcover; 0-88750-3837 paper.

Anita Mayer was nineteen-years-old when she walked away, free, from the nightmare of Nazi domination. She was taken prisoner with her family in August 1944 after being in hiding for eighteen months. In May 1945, she was freed, for the war was over, and the Germans had lost. Emaciated and lice-infested, she went home to find that she was the only one out of her family to return. In *One Who Came Back* Mayer records her life as a victim of the Nazi attempt to destroy the Jews. She survived; six million other Jews did not. Her book does many things, including making a statement about the Jewish people's determination to survive.

One Who Came Back is an important book because it records conditions inside the concentration camp and it describes impressions and reactions of the imprisoned Jewish prisoners: the author is the