

have the standard scene of soldiers swimming nude in a stream, in a sort of pre-battle sacrament of purification that is borrowed from Rupert Brooke's 1914 sonnets. Major also gives us the football match between companies of the regiment, an echo of the soldier/sportsman motif which was popularized by Sir Henry Newbolt and which became one of the most potent traditional metaphors of the war. Even the characters are mostly stereotypical: the dull colonel who looks forward to "a damn fine routing of the Hun"; the rakish but ruminative officer who foresees his last day on earth; the pair of rough soldiers who, despite their grumbling, have hearts of gold; and the timid young rifleman who goes to war for glory and finds precious little of that in the trenches.

This derivative quality might well have been fatal to *No Man's Land*, but instead the novella puts it to good advantage. Major's book emerges as a fascinating echo of a forgotten genre of war literature from the 1920s and 1930s: the so-called middlebrow novels which paid tribute to the comradeship of the trenches. In this regard, *No Man's Land* owes less to Timothy Findlay's *The Wars* than it does to R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* which, despite its anti-war tone, succeeded in affirming the nobility of the common soldier amidst the squalor of war.

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## THE SKY BEYOND THE COAL DUST

**Trapped by Coal.** Constance Horne. Illus. Linda Heslop. Pacific Educational Press, 1994. 144 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 0-88865-091-4.

"And I never again will go down underground." So proclaims Maritime poet-singer Rita MacNeil's "Working Man." And it is this hope that also is at the heart of Constance Horne's nostalgic portrait of a Vancouver Island mining town at the beginning of the First World War.

*Trapped by Coal* chronicles the difficulties an Extension, B.C., coaling family, the Piggotts, face when the father dies in a mining accident and the fourteen-year-old son, already weakened by the lung diseases that infest this small town, must "go underground" to save the family from being evicted from their company house.

Though not told with the stark realism that defines a Kevin Major novel, perhaps, Horne nonetheless provides a strikingly moving account of a family and a town ravaged by strikes and unsafe mines, and covered by a dust that inevitably will destroy all who breathe it. The tale focuses primarily on Millie Piggott, the oldest daughter, who takes it upon herself to find a way to free her brother and her family from the trap that the town has become. To do so, she must confront an influenza epidemic, drought, and a town so ravaged by a recent strike that it has ostracized her best friend for being the daughter of a scab. Though the conclusion is predictable and perhaps somewhat unrealistic, Horne does provide both a touching and

convincing account of a family's survival and a finely-etched portrait of a place and time which have not really received the attention they deserve.

My only criticism of the text is that the illustrations by Linda Heslop don't really evoke the claustrophobic world that Horne so effectively describes. There is only one portrait of Art, the son, in the mine, and even here, not even the rats seem all that menacing. Only the cover, a wonderfully evocative portrait of Millie and her mother fearfully looking into a mine shaft, truly suggests the bleakness that permeates this small town. And this cover also artfully provides the optimism that ultimately defines Horne's tale, for beyond the mine and the frightened pair lurking just outside this trap is a bright blue sky, the gateway to a better world.

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## IN SEARCH OF THE PAST

**White Wave.** Mary Razzell. Greenwood, 1994. 196 pp. \$7.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-161-4.

In *White Wave*, Mary Razzell depicts with convincing realism a young woman's search for her family's past and her own identity. As World War II ends, Jenny Johns eagerly awaits her father's return from the Navy and her start at a high school away from her critical and unloving mother. *White Wave* has some elements of the teenage problem novel, as Jenny experiences rivalry with her sister, the interference of nosy neighbours, the cruelties of schoolmates, the betrayal of a friend, a complete inability to fit within her mother's mould for her as a "good" girl, and her parents' separation. As she meets people from her father's past, copes with hostility at school, and experiences her first love, Jenny gains the confidence to seek out her father, find out about her past, and reconcile with both parents.

*White Wave* is a good and convincing narrative, and portrays Jenny's process of self-discovery in a leisurely, realistic manner. We are always intrigued by the secrets in her family's past, and the gradual pacing of the novel allows us to experience the emotional upheavals and difficult revelations of Jenny's believable search. The narrative is structured in three parts, following Jenny at home with her mother, Jenny boarding alone at high school, and Jenny with her father on his fishing boat. In a satisfying and credible way, we accept that Jenny's construction of her adult self is possible only because she comes to understand and deal with the realities of all three of these worlds.

*White Wave* is set in coastal British Columbia, and one of the great strengths of this novel is its descriptions of coast and sea. Elements of humour and pathos are handled equally well, which is essential in a novel where much of the subject matter is sad and hurtful. The passages in which Jenny receives her first kiss from her boyfriend, David, and later when she learns the details of her birth, are done with sensitivity and never seem overly sentimental or forced. Similarly, Jenny's