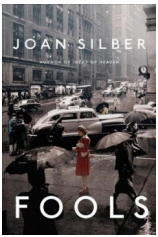


Dorothy Day's Circle of Friends



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I've read other books by Joan Silber, and I think she is a writer who deserves a bigger audience. If you're a fan of historical novels, you will enjoy this book. It's less a novel than a collection of interrelated stories centered on friends of Dorothy Day (or were related to her inner circle). She was a famous Catholic worker who fought hard for the poor.

The first story revolves on a group of young 20-somethings in Day's New York circle about the time she was getting serious about Catholicism. (She was an adult convert.) In the title story, a young vivacious woman named Vera, loves her life surrounded by smart, interesting people, one of whom she marries. Silber captures the feel of New York City during this time, the freedom young adults experienced living together, going to political meetings, working their day jobs but also doing creative things on the side.

Vera is a sign painter until her employer insults her and then eventually fires her without cause. Although in love with her husband, Joe, Vera is drawn to Day's boyfriend, Forster, who is also the father of Day's child. A chance meeting in a park brings Vera and Forster together when they discover the corpse of a poor man who froze to death on a bench.

Shifting locales, 'The Hanging Fruit' tells the story of Anthony, a child of a pair of two New York City progressives--anarchists not Marxists, black flag not red. Anthony's mother left the city to marry somebody rich. Eventually the couple bought a tony hotel in Palm Beach, Florida, where he grew up handsome, wealthy, and sought after by all the girls. In college, he fell in love with Melanie and they got married, but he ruined it by having affairs with lonely older female guests. Anthony eventually lifts money from the till and sets off for Paris where he quickly spirals down due to alcohol abuse. In a bow to karma a young attractive French woman steals his stolen money. Eventually, his mother's ex, another of the Dorothy Day crowd from New York City befriends him, giving Anthony comfort and advice and sharing with him some of the philosophy of his mother's earlier, more liberal life.

In 'Two Opinions,' Silber circles back to Vera and Joe's family and shows married love through the point of view of their daughter who tried all her early life to be 'normal.' When Louise was a teenager her father, Joe, became a conscientious objector to WW II and was imprisoned. Most of her school friends mocked her for this. At one point she discussed with her mother two opinions: the first being that she sided with her father and believed that a brutal war, where millions were killed did not solve anything. Louise also sided with her friends in believing that Hitler was an evil despot who had to be stopped any way possible.

She marries Ted, whose father died in the last year of the war. Although just a story, this piece delves deeply into the nature of marriage, its power relationships, its states of bliss and annoyance and confusion. How difficult it is to really know your partner and yourself, and how different your expectations can be about the life you are sharing.

Silber captures different time periods excellently from the 1920s to current times. Her characters are richly and sensitively drawn. The stories are full of surprises and you care what happen to these people trying to forge purposeful lives.

If this book makes you curious about the dedicated social reformer who lies at its heart, try

All is Grace: a Biography of Dorothy Day by Jim Forest. [Ⓜ]

Posted by Dory L. on February 12, 2014

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