

Next to Love



Babe Huggins is one of those young women (my mother was one also) both lucky and unlucky enough to come of age at the start of World War II. She lives in a small New England town and because the men have left to fight overseas, she scores a department store job, and then later, interesting work at Western Union. She loves being the pulse of news in the town, but a big negative is that she is the first to discover which family has lost a young son or a new spouse.

Next to Love gives a vivid portrait of the war at home in America during WW II as lived by three friends who have known each other since first grade. Both Babe and Millie come from poor families on the wrong side of Sixth Street, whereas Grace's family lives in one of the town's mansions.

The novel chronicles the marriages of each of the three women, and shows how it either destroys or strengthens those unions. At the start of the war, there's one giddy summer when the number of marriages skyrockets--a combination of the men responding to the knowledge of their own mortality and the sheer lust for life-- seize this moment because no one knows how long it will last.

Of the triad, Babe is the most fearless and unconventional. She follows her husband to his camp in the south, putting up with physical abuse on the train and a nasty landlady who has no sympathy for the "camp followers." Her husband, Claude, comes home from the war missing a few fingers and with serious psychological problems but Babe stands by him. At the end of the war, she loses her job, she has to give it up so that the vets have work again. Both Millie and Grace fare less well.

One interesting side plot is the rise of civil rights. Babe doesn't understand why Grace's black maid (who also attended school with them) can not be treated as an equal. This and other events change Babe into a passionate civil rights activist.

The novel covers a long time span from the early 40s to May 1962. It's not only about the three women, but about the next generation also. It's a wide canvas, but Feldman's ability to tell a good story carries the reader through the changes in time and character. And the historical details seem right on cue. This novel makes an excellent historical read, and it will most likely appeal to woman more than men.

For another wonderful book about the war at home and how it affects relationships, try Sarah Blake's The Postmistress.

Posted by Dory L. on December 7, 2011

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