ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

A Hundred Miles to the City
978-1-4343-1731-5
Three Stars (out of Five)

New Yorkers and Californians who see the American Midwest and Plains states as hopelessly unprogressive refer to the regions as Flyover Country; they dismiss heartlanders based on broad generalizations but rarely acquaint themselves with the struggles particular to small-town people. Here then is a fictional primer on the arc of the twentieth century in the middle of the continent by means of a rural family epic set in northwestern Missouri.

The town of Bedford is an apt stand-in for so many declining burgs: it's rich in empty houses and flaking away with the rusting railroad spurs. Even as opportunities there reduce the sometimes conflicted protagonist Dona identifies an increasing bond: "…a person's place in the community could be bought over a period of time. Each time you passed over a sidewalk a street a threshold you gained interest in the site gathering equity as you invested the minutes of your life." The attachment to place is quite physical as in Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*. Dona's father Sam Schmit a hardscrabble farmer "…put his feelings of pride before any concern for the well-being of his children." He followed harvests once taking an overloaded Joad-mobile over the Rockies to Oregon for a *Grapes of Wrath* summer parents and youngsters alike picking fruit for subsistence piecework wages.

The characters marry for puppy love and become teenage parents crowding together generations as if there were a tight deadline and not much else to aim for. Diplomas and degrees aren't valued like paychecks. Dona too naively follows the typical route of too-young marriage then wonders which guiding ideas comprise her husband's personality: "…his hopes his dreams. She didn't really know him not on the soul-sharing level."

After being abandoned Dona leaves three daughters on the family farm in the care of her parents to work as a war-time Rosie Riveter (actually a welder) in Kansas City. There she enjoys courtship and outings with friends. Her labor earns respect and a small but steady income—benefits she believes she can't equal at home. The choice between living apart indefinitely or earning enough to meet their needs is of Solomonic difficulty. The book's primary focus is the period of Dona's active motherhood in the Depression Thirties through the fatter mid-Fifties. Her lifespan coincides with the decline of family farms and the rise of large-

scale agriculture.

Author and retired educator Clare Samson sets an ambitious agenda trying to preserve a disappearing era by squeezing in as many aspects of country life as possible but a lack of winnowing between plot-crucial events and diversionary matters detracts from the book's power even while it educates. *A Hundred Miles to the City* depicts the challenges losses and joys of one representative woman but it also serves as an anthropological case study on the customs and eventual depopulation of breadbasket communities. It is no doubt overly padded but the story works both logically and emotionally.

Todd Mercer