

A Stream to Follow

Jess Wright

Spark Press

(336pp)

978-1-68463-121-6

In the sensitive historical novel A Stream to Follow, a doctor seeks to heal from wounds left by a war.

In Jess Wright's historical novel *A Stream to Follow*, a doctor returns home after World War II and encounters ongoing domestic conflicts.

Bruce hopes that setting up his medical practice in idyllic, tranquil Hollidaysburg will relieve his bad memories of lost love and treating soldiers on European battlefields. But two difficult patients incite trauma instead: a former girlfriend who's unhappy in her marriage comes onto him; and a factory worker's injuries from a car accident lead to the discovery that he has silicosis from work, after which Bruce contributes to a court case related to the factory's working conditions.

Bruce's life is threatened; the prospect of a visit from his British love interest, Amelia, is an additional complication. Meanwhile, Bruce's brother, Glen, who's also a veteran of the war, drinks too much; his erratic moods lead to danger. Bruce advises another doctor, Sarah, in her treatment Glen, remaining loyal to his brother despite his provocations.

Taking the many perspectives of those who know him into account, the story allows the final verdict about Bruce—who may be a do-gooder, or may have a death wish—to develop over time. Amelia, a Cambridge graduate with her own wartime memories, and Sarah are present as strong women who are committed to their own advancement, and their points of view are shared in italicized asides. Glen's unpredictable mental state explodes onto Bruce, brings out sides of him that surprise even him. On the whole, the cast seems self-aware, and the novel has a musing tenor as a result.

Though there are multiple narrative strands in the book, they work together well. Focus on personal healing is maintained throughout. Still, intense moments pile up, both in flashbacks to the war and in Bruce's present. He deals with a bevy emergencies, seeking room for fishing and socializing breaks.

Lessons on silicosis and its causes wend into the book, which also details the chaos of battle with historical accuracy. Indeed, Bruce's troubles are made to mirror contemporaneous social troubles: PTSD, occupational hazards, and domestic abuse. His exchanges with Amelia are a lighter element, making room for spontaneity and genuine feelings. The book's ending is a happy surprise, given the many traumatic memories that came before it.

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MARI CARLSON (January 10, 2022)

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