

## An American Tune

### Barbara Shoup

Indiana University Press (Jan 6, 2012)

Softcover \$19.00 (315pp)

978-0-253-00742-1

Some writers have a gift for creating cozy scenes and comfortable locales despite a larger context of unease and violence. In her new novel *An American Tune*, Barbara Shoup accomplishes this: meticulously establishing pleasant, comfortable settings of seemingly well-lived lives, then undercutting them with the creeping shadow of a very messy reality. In this case it's the Vietnam war.

The story begins with in the early 2000s with 50-something Nora Quillen revisiting her alma mater in the Midwest. Nora's daughter is slated to start here in just a few days despite Nora's initial protests. We soon discover two things: that something awful once happened to Nora there, and that Nora is not her real name at all.

Back we go in time then to 1965. Young Jane is starting college herself, just a normal girl from a blue-collar family. Her college experience is banal but richly drawn by Shoup: She finds a friend (the off-kilter Bridget); she gets a boyfriend; she grows apart from her family; her classes challenge her. Yet in the background, slowly working its way into Jane's consciousness, is the Vietnam war and those who protest it. Jane seems to want only a small life, one without violence or tumult. Indeed, she wants the quiet moments of beauty that Shoup draws so well for us.

As her lifestyle clashes with those of her protester friends, she poses the question, "What's so wrong with being happy?" Yet she is highly sensitive to the wrongness all around her. After college she begins to question her own, passive existence as a teacher and that of her little students, "All she could think was that most of them would spend their whole lives this way: well-behaved, in line, doing what they were supposed to do."

Then, that lifestyle is destroyed anyway in a single bomb blast by those same friends. Such is the central conflict of the novel as it leaps forward to present day: whether Jane/Nora will be able to continue drifting through her life as she did for so long—marrying the wrong guy because it was easy, forgetting the past—now that she is awakened to reality in her later years.

A novel poised between Jane's past and Nora's present, *An American Tune* is a walk through a historic period that is beautifully rendered. Bit by bit, the war and its effect on the national identity insinuates itself into the characters lives, reminding the contemporary reader—whether young adult or adult—that no war, and no life, is isolated.

Shoup has authored six novels and coauthored two books about the creative process. Her novels *Wish You Were Here* and *Stranded in Harmony* were selected as American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults.

LEIA MENLOVE (October 29, 2012)

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