Clarion Review

General

Beyond the Cedars
Sandy Simon
The Cedars Group
978-0-9669625-5-0
Four Stars (out of Five)

To live in this world // you must be able / to do three things: / to love what is mortal; / to hold it // against your bones knowing / your own life depends on it; / and when the time comes to let it go / to let it go. —Mary Oliver *In Blackwater Woods* from *American Primitive*

A passionate affair of a few weeks duration between an immigrant in transit and a young Marseillaise woman makes an indelible impression on the separate lives of the principals which persists for decades. *Beyond the Cedars* follows Iksander Chaloub Thomé from a rural village near Mount Lebanon in 1920 to Kissimmee Florida seeking prosperity in mercantile sales and eventually land speculation under his anglicized Ellis Island name Alexander Thomas. In a boom-and-bust cattle ranching community he faces Nativist prejudice but also meets fair just people who grow into friends. At the behest of his father Alexander marries though declines to remove a ring obtained in France or explain its significance.

The narrative shifts for Part II into the life of Madeleine DuBois the daughter of Iksander's uncle's consort. She has been even more profoundly affected by the short but intense relationship. Madeleine won't relinquish unlikely hopes that Iksander will one day return for her without a prompt or request. Years pass sans communication; the Third Reich's rising shadow casts Madeleine's future in doubt.

Western Europe and small-town America contrast sharply with the pace and amenities back in the home village of Douma. Expectations of the often-conquered are limited. Iksander's niece phrases the prevailing sentiment with ground-level elegance: "‘"*We wish you enough."* Don't you see? Enough…enough food enough sunshine to brighten your life…enough rain to provide for your needs…but not necessarily do we wish for more….*things.*"‘

Favorite phrases are repeated or reappear differently arranged. Language economy isn't compact enough in the early going. Action is delayed in favor of descriptive passages that

convey both historical context and justification for emotional attachment to unique places. Toward the middle developments become engrossing and pacing is nicely calibrated.

This is Sandy Simon's fourth offering. Previous books include southeast Florida histories *Remembering* and *The Amazing Story of Highland Beach* and a first person account of recovery from cerebral hemorrhage *A Stroke of Genius*. The retired real estate developer helped negotiate the Camp David Peace Accords of 1978. Simon sits on the board of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital a facility built largely with contributions of Lebanese and Syrian-Americans. The initial project was spearheaded by actor Danny Thomas who makes a cameo appearance here.

Beyond the Cedars elevates first love to a sustaining force against hardship and loss of hope. It reinforces a simple premise by incorporating varied national tendencies: the romantic fatalism of the French the cowboy individualism of the American model and the determined long views of the modern Phoenicians in homelands old and new bound to always find only enough and no more.