



Centerville

Karen Osborn

Vandalia Press (Oct 1, 2012)

Softcover \$16.99 (192pp)

978-1-935978-64-0

Centerville, a quiet novel by Karen Osborn, begins with a terrific bang, the shockwaves from which touch every part of the story until the very end. On an idyllic Saturday afternoon in 1967 in this pleasant Midwestern town, the lives of its inhabitants are obliterated when a bomb explodes in the downtown drugstore, destroying the store, two adjacent businesses, and the lives of ten people. The bomb was placed there by George Fowler, the estranged husband of Joyce Fowler, a young woman who was a clerk in the store. The novel explores the lives of those left behind over the ensuing few days: Reverend Edwards, a minister in town; Sandi, his daughter; her friend Bert, whose father owned the drugstore and was killed in the fire; Jack Turnbow, a police officer injured in the fire; and Elizabeth, Bert's mother.

Osborn is a skilled writer. Her description of the explosion and fire that begin the story is captivating. Bert, confronting the disaster and realizing her father was in the fire, is described in several intense sentences: "Bert's hair was white next to the fire. It stood out from her head as if she had stuck her finger in an electrical socket ... The sound that came out of Bert now couldn't be defined."

The summer of 1967 in the United States was a time of fires and social explosions in several metropolitan centers. Detroit experienced major riots, fires, and deaths that summer, and some argue that the city never fully recovered from those times. Osborn uses the fire in the drugstore symbolically to mark the end of one bright era and the beginning of a darker, more turbulent one. In the beginning, before the fire, he says, "On Main Street sunlight fell through the four large windows that made up the storefront of Greenly's Drugstore. A golden haze moved through the store, spreading like liquid poured from a gigantic cup." And, at the end of the novel: "This storm marked the end of the world he knew and the beginning of an unknown one, a world he didn't understand. The quiet sleepiness of his small town didn't exist anymore."

Sudden violence assaults the sensibilities like the shockwaves of an explosion. So it is with the folks of Centerville. Osborn deftly examines how each of her main characters responds to the disaster. George Fowler, the man who set the bomb, sought out Reverend Edwards for counsel. Edwards struggled: "In religion classes there had been lectures on the nature of man's relationship to God—the God who would forgive, the God who judged, the God who gave life and would take it away. But none of that felt of any help." Bert at one point wishes that she had died in the fire along with her father.

Although the story in *Centerville* is placed in the late 1960s, it is a tale of all times written by a gifted author. *Centerville* is Osborn's fourth novel. An earlier book, *Patchwork*, was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year.

JOHN SENGER (Winter 2013)

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