ForeWord Reviews

SHORT STORIES

Cold Snap: Bulgaria Stories
Cynthia Morrison Phoel
Southern Methodist University Press
978-0-87074-561-4
(Jun 13, 2010)

The people of Old Mountain have been suffering in "the kind of cold that left a scar." In this Bulgarian town, "all the apartments…were attached to a single switch for central heat…the town had set a rule that the temperatures had to remain below freezing for four days before it was turned on." Notably, some people in town wish there was something they could do to find relief from the oppressive cold.

Using the cold as a unifying metaphor, author Cynthia Morrison Phoel, a former Peace Corps volunteer who worked in a Bulgarian town not unlike the fictional Old Mountain, offers readers six connected stories, exquisite Chekhovian snapshots of people whose frustrations and desires are powerfully portrayed.

Readers meet the eighth-grader whose life is a "warp of confusion, a kaleidoscope of worries." This bewildered adolescent, more normal than he can possibly realize, too often feels as though he is drowning "in a puddle of his own misery" even as he spends considerable time joyfully "pondering the twin miracles" of women's breasts. There is also the spoiled young woman whose "parents were the kind who bought [her everything even] before she asked for it"; her life is simply "arranged and planned for," and she is erroneously conditioned to believe (though she will learn otherwise) that she "would not [ever] have to work or worry in order to succeed." And, among the many other characters in Old Mountain, there is the seemingly insignificant man with the "oversized heart" who controls the town's central heat, "the flipper of the switch, unofficial patron of heat."

Because of the metaphorical and actual cold that affects Old Mountain, all the characters' lives are well-trod paths of "*could haves, should haves, and if onlys*." The boorish spouses, the ineffective parents, the so-called friends, and the isolated individuals are forced to ask themselves how they could let this cold and discomfort happen to them.

Readers outside of southeastern Europe may not be familiar with Bulgaria, or be able to find the 43,000 square mile Balkan republic on the world map, but through the highly recommended *Cold Snap*, they are given a wonderful opportunity to travel vicariously to a

seldom-visited corner of the world, to immerse themselves in a rich multicultural experience, and to savor superbly rendered short fiction.

Tim Davis