

Eastbound from Flagstaff

Annette Valentine

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Eastbound from Flagstaff is a thoughtful Christian novel whose portrayal of 1920s America is accomplished.

Annette Valentine's bittersweet Christian historical novel *Eastbound from Flagstaff* brings 1920s Detroit to life.

When he's a teenager, Simon witnesses his mother's death. Feeling guilty because he could not save her and having lost trust in God, he leaves home, seeking work in Detroit. The story follows Simon as he makes a life for himself and matures.

The book conveys its locales and history well, weaving period information into the text. There's a pleasant balance of storytelling and dialogue, too. Simon's time as a lodger results in insights into boarding house life—a comforting substitute for newcomers missing the friends and family they'd left behind. His dead-end automobile factory job is left behind; in its wake, he joins the police force and finds himself in the thick of Prohibition-era crime. Quotidian life is made interesting in his story, although there are some tortured metaphors and overheated prose involved in its telling.

Built up as a Kentucky farm boy with ambition but little education or exposure to the world, Simon is a good-natured and convincing lead. His sense of wonder in bustling Detroit is mixed with incidents that reveal his intelligence.

The book's Christian themes are realistically conveyed, and the text avoids preaching in favor of convincing scenes. A pastor and his family welcome Simon in. Simon's devout father is saddened by his loss of faith, but is understanding. Simon resists the pastor's efforts to draw him to church, but his dwindling faith is important in the text, and he is shown taking comfort in his mother's Bible.

The relationships in Simon's family—between his father, himself, and his brother, Alan—are sharp in their contrasts. They underscore notions that ties of faith and love endure beyond differences and disappointments. However, long scenes include unnecessary details, including telephone numbers, formal greetings and goodbyes, and directions for getting around Detroit. Some information repeats.

The story moves at a satisfying pace, engaging and holding attention, though equilibrium is lost late in the book, when a cascade of incidents is compressed into too few pages. The resultant combination of drama, melodrama, and tragedy is heavy handed. Simon's late move back toward faith is a more successful conclusion.

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SUSAN WAGGONER (September 12, 2019)

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