ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

Evensong
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BookSurge
978-1-4196-6824-1
Three Stars (out of Five)

The intensely dramatic history of the World War II era continues to attract novelists who find inspiration in placing people of ordinary—and at times extraordinary—abilities against the backdrop of danger and turbulence that plagued Europe of the 1930s and 40s. Suspense and romance flourish in such settings and while there's a readymade allure to these stories it is also difficult to avoid cliches of Casablanca-like Resistance heroes brave but doomed lovers and uber-cruel Nazis.

Evensong does commence with some originality before falling prey to stereotype: it follows a young Missouri farm girl Christina who has been trained in singing opera by her Austrian father. After his death she lives a miserable and unappreciated life with her cold mother and malicious uncouth brother. Christina eventually escapes the farm only to begin a harrowing adventure in occupied France of the late 1930's. She finds herself caught between her family ties to Vichy France (Philippe Petain is her uncle!) and the French Resistance movement. The author places her heroine in factual historic settings which allows for dramatization albeit somewhat awkwardly encapsulated of major events including the battles leading to the occupation of Southern France in 1942 and the collaboration of Philippe Petain with the Nazis. As the story develops Christina is forced to accompany her uncle to North Africa where she defies his order to sing opera for Hitler and his entourage. Aided by a dashing Resistance fighter who falls for her she returns to France via submarine and helps tend to wounded fighters but is later captured by a villainous SS officer and imprisoned. Laurent the Resistance fighter must struggle through a massive battle between allied forces and the Germans in a desperate effort to reach the young girl he loves.

The sweep of the novel encompasses the rural Midwest the politics of Vichy France political espionage in North Africa war orphans American paratroopers French Maquis (Underground fighters) and German prison camps and Panzer battles. This is dramatic material to be sure but it stretches credibility to place one plucky farm girl at the center of so much

activity. The tale falters as the heroine strides from one courageous defiant act to the next. The author is still finding her writer's voice and while her descriptive prose flows nicely the dialogue is stiff impeding the reader's ability to embrace the story or fully believe in the characters. Writers who rise above cliché like Alan Furst and Sebastian Faulks imbue their characters with complexity and carefully choose select moments in the period's history to dramatize. This author could take a page from them but is nevertheless clearly unafraid to work hard and think big. One can certainly appreciate her careful attention to detail diligent effort to research the period and the ambitious scope of the work.

Laurie Sullivan