

Five Bullets

Larry Duberstein

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Duberstein captures heartbreaking ennui with his disciplined volley between time periods and details stabbing out at unexpected moments.

Five Bullets is a story of two men—Karel Bondy, a father and husband who escaped from Auschwitz and struggled to trust and hope for absolution, and Carl Barry, an immigrant entrepreneur in America whose dry personality and curt mannerisms mystify and endear him to his new wife and his young nephew. Although they are one and the same, author Larry Duberstein keeps readers oscillating between time periods in a steady cadence that broadens the chasm between the fiery Karel and the hardened Carl. As the memories of one merge with the determined will of the other, Duberstein produces an intimate sense of mortal purgatory, which can be heartbreaking while it achieves its own predictable monotony.

When we are introduced to Karel in 1936, he is a promising architect with enthusiasm for the simple beauties of his work, his wife, and his prospects. During his years in America, he sees financial success in New York as a builder and has relationships with friends and family, but the perspective has changed. Contentment and even happiness are without the beauty of hope.

As they face being relocated to a prison camp, Karel's wife, who wants to protect the innocence of her children for as long as possible, tells Karel, "Okay, be the outraged citizen. The abused, the persecuted—I don't disagree. Just first of all be the Poppa." The strength and sacrifice of being who he must be in order to protect his children is inspiring and becomes all the more profound later in his life when Karel can no longer recall his children's names. Similarly, after Karel escapes, he joins a small army of resistance fighters in the woods. They conduct small raids and create whatever obstacles they can for the Germans; they wait to ambush soldiers who are leading a group of naked women through the snow into the woods for execution. The confusion, horror, and chaos of the scene that ensues is briefly but expertly written.

After the war, Karel's encounters seem to carry the weight of this and so many other brutalities as he tries to reclaim his humanity, but the tremendous success of Duberstein's story is that Karel's reclamation takes a lifetime. Duberstein never lets pure horror or momentary beauty disconnect the reader from the story he has to tell. He balances each vignette of this one man's two lives on a foundation of masterful writing.

SARA BUDZIK (Winter 2015)

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