

Clarion Review ★★★★☆

HISTORICAL

Gary Gatlin: Reluctant Hero

Carl F. Haupt

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Gary Gatlin: Reluctant Hero is a historical novel whose wholesome demeanor and nostalgic wartime spirit are delightful.

In Carl F. Haupt's historical novel *Gary Gatlin: Reluctant Hero*, a Utah farm boy is caught up in South Pacific politics.

Gary Gatlin's German immigrant father is a farmer who teaches him to make his living with his mind as well as his labor. In 1939, he sends nineteen-year-old Gary to improve his craft of apple grafting from the world experts in Formosa, a Japanese territory. World War II begins during the first months of Gary's stay.

Gary is fluent in Japanese and is skilled at martial arts, thanks to a Japanese farmer he met selling produce in California. Because of this, the Japanese military suspects him of spying. With the help of friends, Gary eludes the Japanese and seeks justice.

The collision of Gary's mundane apple grafting mission with the war's unpredictability makes for explosive moments, but Gary meets adventures with a level head. Given his capabilities, there is no question that he'll get himself out of binds; the question is how. Gary finds creative, entertaining solutions to absurd problems, such as how to get off of the uncharted island he swims to after being cast from a Dutch ship that he thought would lead him to safety.

In light of Gary's determined attitude, the tone is dogged. Descriptions focus on the execution of plans and ambitions. Gary's uneasy feelings upon his arrival in Formosa, his homesickness, and his increasing attraction to Kasumi, the daughter of a Formosa farmer, are mentioned as distractions. Kasumi's forward declarations of love are a welcome touch.

Gary's stoicism keeps emotional melodrama to a minimum. He is dry and driven by principle. Spunky women characters soften the narrative with their warmth and pragmatic concern for Gary. They and international refugees trying to leave Formosa fill out the cast with a variety of personalities bound by the commonality of their determination and generosity. Gary's fellow farmers, as well as the indigenous Paiwan mountain people he meets on a train, ground the story's attention to the land and hard work. Enemy characters are authentic, formidable challenges to this stalwart lot.

Militaristic in its precision, the book's chapters are equal in length and are titled with dates; they are chronological, and their pace is steady. Sequences are easy to follow. Details about ships, aircraft, and farm equipment are crisp. The story builds to a rousing pinnacle and relieving conclusion.

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MARI CARLSON (September 13, 2019)

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