ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Gun Ball Hill
Ellen Cooney
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"So this is war." This nascent realization is uttered more than once by characters in this historical novel. Readers are privy to the woes and grief of ordinary folk as they are thrust into the maelstrom of a most difficult birth—that of the United States of America. The book offers a glimpse into the hearts and minds of colonialists and a witness to their cries of "death to Englishmen!"

The tale begins in 1774 on the banks of the Kennebec river in the town of Tibbetston, Maine, where the Mowlan family live. A tragic event befalls this family and resonates through remaining friends and relatives until revenge takes its shape in the form of a foundry where gun balls are manufactured to fight the English. This spirit of revenge reflects the general unrest of the country in the months leading up to the outbreak of war.

This is the author's fifth novel; her short stories have been widely published in journals including *The New Yorker*, *The New England Review*, *The Literary Review*, and *Fiction*, to name just a few. She has taught creative writing at MIT, Boston College, and Harvard University.

Cooney's painstaking historical details add weight to the authenticity of the characters' experience. She tells the story of the Boston Tea Party through the voice of a witness, giving the account immediacy as well as a human and poignant perspective, when Jossey recounts "The Night of the Tea" to her dead sister Lavinia.

Cooney adds another dimension to her novel by imbuing her characters with a spiritual sense. Patrick Rouse falls inexplicably and violently ill aboard his boat as he approaches Boston harbour. It is a sign his crew members recognize afterwards as a physical manifestation of his impending grief even before he learns of the slaughter of his family.

The author describes the historical events of the war and its human cost. Olivia Sunderson, age twenty, leaves a heartbreaking note before she hangs herself after seeing first-hand the conflict at Charlestown: “My eyes that saw War, Are not eyes, Allowed to ever look no more.”

This novel truly brings history to life. It would be a wonderful complimentary text for anyone studying this era. The historical period of this story is specific, but the human themes are universal and relevant today, since each generation has been touched, directly or through relatives, by the effects of war. Cooney’s characters express feelings that all readers can at least recognize: the impeding gloom of armed conflict, the horror of living through war, and the permeating sense of grief that it carries through generations.