

Clarion Review ★★★★★

GENERAL FICTION

I Really Wanna Go Home

Raymond J. Radner

iUniverse

978-1-4620-4556-3

It is 1952, and a young married couple struggles as addiction pulls the husband into the bottle. In *I Really Wanna Go Home* by Raymond J. Radner, George Edwards drinks. Every day. All day. George and Margie married before World War II, and George delayed a promising baseball career to serve his country. But George was wounded during the fighting in North Africa—severely enough to kill his aspirations in professional sports.

George may have recovered physically, but his mental state has never permitted him to stray from his favorite stool at Dave's Bar and Grille on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His disability benefit pays for his bar tab. Margie, a confirmed Catholic who is steadfast in her intent to uphold her marriage vows, works in a shoe factory and tolerates her husband's drinking.

While Walter "Doc" Hayden, a casual denizen of the bar, has been somewhat impaired by poliomyelitis, evidencing a slight limp and minor damage to his torso, he is thoroughly crippled by a poor self-image in spite of an impressive career as a medical researcher. After one particular destructive episode between Margie and George, she happens upon Doc outside the bar. The two have dinner together, and a romance blossoms. Margie leaves George for Doc's bed, and George dives deeper into the bottle before being badly injured in a fall from a subway platform.

The narrative moves on with dramatic changes in both protagonists' lives. Margie knows she needs the "most important thing ... a place in life where she could find hope." She also understands that while Doc is kinder than George, he will never become a true, supportive partner because of his poor self image.

Leaving Doc behind, Margie takes work in a lipstick factory, but her ambition cannot be contained. She begins a small side business using salvaged perfume and lipstick. By novel's end, she has progressed to Central Park West and a conglomeration of companies, with millions of dollars of art gracing her walls.

George's progress is slower, but no less dramatic. He becomes acquainted with Columbia University students who frequent the bar and begins to audit classes. Discovering he has a natural ability to write, he earns an audience after penning an eloquent story around Korea's frontlines.

Some readers might find that Radner spends too much time establishing the core of his novel: the idea that George is an alcoholic mired in despair and Margie is a woman ahead of the feminist revolution. We get it, already.

The first fifty pages are packed with dialog, revealing George's situation through his inane remarks to Dave, the bar owner and his long-time friend who wants to help. And though Margie's ultimate success seems less plausible than George's, especially because George's rejection of alcohol is never deeply discussed, Radner's development of Margie's character is more thorough.

Radner's work, while complicated by sometimes heavy-handed and off-kilter dialog, is easily read. Occasionally, chapters jump back and forth in time and history buffs may be disconcerted by the repeated reference to an erroneous date for General MacArthur's firing by President Truman.

Regardless, *I Really Wanna Go Home* has a solid premise and an unusual and intriguing story line that has been delivered to the page by an author who has great love and knowledge of the Lower East Side of New York City and its people.

GARY PRESLEY (February 16, 2012)

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