

If only I could...

Greg M. Sarwa

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The winner of ForeWord Magazine's 2005 Book of the Year Bronze Medal in Science Fiction Greg M. Sarwa has turned to romantic fiction for his second novel. An enchanting story of two elderly lovers trying to recapture their lost romance *If only I could...* runs a range of vibrant emotions without ever sinking into the maudlin or the melodramatic. It's a good strong story which tugs at the heartstrings and at times tickles the funny bone.

In his twilight years John Kadel lives in a nursing home rebelling when he can and refusing to admit to the ailments the doctors have diagnosed for him. He lives a relatively humdrum life except for the verbal jousting with his neighbour Frank at least until an accidental bump from a woman in black opens a flood of old memories and begins a series of new adventures. The woman is Agatha the love of his life since childhood.

The narrative about their lives and lost love is told in the present and in flashbacks which sometimes disrupt the flow of the plot but at others heighten its tension. The device cleverly reveals the characters' backgrounds with their shortcomings as well as their strengths but the use of "The Boy" and "Golden Hair" as references to John and Agatha appears contrived. Their dialogue though is consistently credible and interesting and conveys moods of nostalgia and incidents of "what might have been." Older readers will easily relate to John and Agatha's attempts to reclaim their past through visits to former haunts in the Old Town or by travelling on a bus trip "just like old times." They will also empathize with the difficulties the pair face when they decide to live together and Agatha's adult children begin to object the son even going so far as to be rudely obnoxious. Younger readers will perhaps become more understanding of how long lasting love can be. And all will relate to the incidents of seniors grappling with cell phones while wanting to live independently but facing the inevitabilities of failing health and the occasional need to tell their children unpleasant truths about family relationships.

Throughout the story there is an underlying tension that something will happen to ruin the happiness the pair is trying to achieve. John of course is always trying to keep Agatha from learning he lives in a nursing home. And their planned trip is disrupted when Agatha's granddaughter breaks her arm and she feels obligated to care for the child. Then there is the rejection by Agatha's son that leaves John feeling guilty about being "another anchor around Agatha's neck." But most telling of all is the day Agatha gets the message John's cell phone is out of service and she must begin the search that ultimately ends with the final disruption to their lives and her poignant lament "If only I could...".

Well written well paced and significantly insightful Sarwa's novel is well worth reading.

M. WAYNE CUNNINGHAM (March 8, 2007)

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