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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ HISTORICAL

Life Changing Event

Dickson Loos
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The proverbial all-American boy gets caught up in history's whirlwind in this intriguing novel of war, law, and art.

In Dickson Loos's historical-fiction novel, Elmer Davis, WWII combat veteran, becomes a hard-charging defense attorney and then retires to pursue art stolen by the Nazis. In language without literary pretensions, *Life Changing Event* provides a taste of infantry combat, a peek into the horrors of a POW camp, and insight into the strategy from a defense attorney's table, all while charting the career of a man who finally learns what's important in life.

In high school, shy and socially awkward Elmer had been deeply in love with beautiful Suzanne Robards, but she later tossed him aside to marry her Vassar art professor while Elmer was in military training. It was that event, plus his time as a prisoner of war, that changed Elmer's outlook on life, spurring his success. Years later, Elmer realizes his hyperintense lifestyle cost him his family, and he retires from criminal law only to encounter Suzanne again as he begins a new career.

Loos's research is evident in this fast-moving novel. He has unearthed history of the 84th Infantry Division, which took heavy casualties on the Siegfried Line. His knowledge of impressionist paintings comes into play as his protagonist traces art stolen from Jewish families by Nazis during the war. There is enough information in this book to make for two volumes of more depth—one dealing with Elmer's war and law career, a second following his adventures in tracing art and finding lost love.

Several coincidences diminish the believability of some scenes. For example, after Elmer decides to trace stolen art, his first client arrives via introduction by his once-estranged daughter. Elmer's daughter knows a nurse and her daughter, who introduce Elmer to the prospective elderly client, but it turns out the nurse and daughter are Germans whom Elmer helped escape from Russian forces as the war ended. This coincidence, combined with Elmer meeting the Wehrmacht soldier who captured him forty years earlier (an incident taken from real life), seem too much.

Elmer Davis is a believable character—the proverbial all-American boy caught up in history's whirlwind. Descriptions of his high-school life, military training, and active duty seem spot-on, right down to perceptive analyses of soldiers and officers and the rigors of training and combat. Loos also does solid work with character motivation, as when Elmer finds his niche in the army and becomes more aware of his own intelligence and capabilities.

Loos is able to flesh out characters without a lot of words. This style, though, creates dialogue that is often overly formal, even stilted. For example, when Elmer returns from overseas and addresses his sister: "You have a well-ordered, happy family. You are not only beautiful, Carol, you are also smart and very efficient."

Fans of historical fiction will appreciate one man's adventures as part of the Greatest Generation.

GARY PRESLEY (December 12, 2013)

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