



No Certain Home

Marlene Lee

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No Certain Home reveals an Agnes Smedley who, though she felt like an outcast for much of her life, became a true revolutionary for hire.

“A citizen of the world,” says writer, journalist, and spy extraordinaire Agnes Smedley: “I’m a freelance revolutionary.” Marlene Lee’s *No Certain Home* is a fictionalized account of Smedley’s life, one that may take some liberties with dialogue and character motivations but remains true to the timeline of Smedley’s adventurous and courageous life.

The novel begins in Shanghai in 1937, as Smedley interviews the Chinese general Zhu De. Zhu De’s story is alternated with chapters of Smedley’s biography, beginning with her childhood in Missouri. Born into poverty in the late nineteenth century, Agnes worked from a young age, took care of her three younger siblings, and refined her skills as a hunter, gatherer, and equestrienne. Fueled by her love of reading and a keen intelligence, she parlayed her autodidactic ways into a teaching job in remote New Mexico. Lee conveys Smedley’s sense of independence with a clipped narrative voice that resembles reportage and allows for little self-reflection or self-pity. Smedley is a bracing woman of action.

Smedley’s actions are motivated by injustice, inequality, revolution against the rich and powerful, sexuality, and a hunger for knowledge and understanding of the world around her. Lee gives context and grounding to Smedley’s many causes, including her participation in the fight for Indian revolutionaries to overthrow British rule, and her passionate devotion to the Communist Chinese party. Lee also covers Smedley’s inner struggle with sexuality, the idea of marriage, and her eventual acceptance, and physical enjoyment, of men as partners. This internal diversity is all well mapped and effectively conveyed.

No Certain Home reveals an Agnes Smedley who, though she felt like an outcast for much of her life, became a true revolutionary for hire. From pioneer to reporter to spy, and through many callings in between, Smedley had a veritable vagabond spirit, able to be contained by no man, ideology, or political system. Lee’s novelization of this historical figure is as breathtaking as was Smedley herself.

MONICA CARTER (Summer 2016)

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