

No Straight Thing

F. Nelson Smith

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Ultimately heartwarming despite its macabre circumstances, No Straight Thing is an engrossing historical mystery.

In F. Nelson Smith's character-driven novel, *No Straight Thing*, a murder mystery connects a war veteran and a young girl in Depression-era Canada.

The closing years of the 1930s find Canada in dire straits with no respite in sight. Much of the populace is out of work and resorts to vagrancy to survive. WWI veteran Fergus survives with the help of his father. Fergus is cynical, and his detachment borders on self isolation.

The murder of a friend and fellow veteran, Peter, forces Fergus to confront the war and his difficulties adjusting to civilian life. A local magnate frames Peter for financial fraud, and his legacy is tarnished; Fergus feels compelled to polish it back up.

Fergus crosses paths with a precocious young girl, Cat. Cat witnessed the crime, but she's already fragile and blocks its details; in response, Fergus pursues other means of proving the murder, though Cat's difficulties draw him in, too.

Peter's murder anchors the story, but the focus shifts between Fergus and Cat's fragile psyches. Fergus suffers from undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder; a series of accidental deaths shatter Cat's young mind. The two find strength in each other. Their growth leads to self-improvement and helps to solve the murder, with their repressed memories proving key.

Characters are ably rendered, growing noticeably over the course of the story in a way that builds upon established motivations and feels earned. Cat becomes more emotionally strong even as the truth about her troubled family emerges. Peter's death might have broken her, but other characters, from Fergus's housekeeper to a child psychologist, contribute to assisting her.

Period details are helpfully incorporated. Characters speak in formal, era-appropriate vernaculars. Scenes are laid out well; small details build their atmospheres, from crunching leaves to aromas wafting by. The resultant ambiance complements the dark subject matter. Dialogues are deep and complex, though the text still maintains its focus on the mystery of Peter's death and the central relationships, with their earned loyalties and struggles for mental health.

The pacing feels slow at first, but it's carefully controlled. The police's investigation follows a realistic, historically appropriate timeline, taking time to explore and resolve all subplots. It builds toward a satisfying conclusion, best embodied in the reveal of Peter's killer.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (November 28, 2018)

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