

Steel

Kathleen Novak

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Steel is an intimate coming-of-age story set in a gritty northern Minnesota mining town in the 1920s. The town, made up of poor immigrant families—mainly Italians, Croatians, and Scandinavians—has as its sustenance the world's widest open iron ore pit, and as its heart, the family and ethnic ties that mold the attitudes and actions of its people.

Of all the surviving children of two Croatian immigrants, ambitious, hardworking Tony seems fated for something other than a miner's life. But the heavy weight of poverty and hardship that burdened his parents soon falls on his shoulders, too. Omens and events portend trouble: instead of the upturned horseshoe often found nailed to a wall for luck, the entryway of his family home, a boardinghouse for miners, hosts a gun—a warning to boarders who might take a liking to Tony's sisters.

When a young miner who's a friend and mentor to Tony leaves to become a police officer in Chicago, Tony dreams of adventure and hopes to follow behind. Instead, love intervenes; adventures are set aside. Tony, hoping to marry the grocer's lovely daughter, Vita, takes a grueling job in the mines. There, no one cares that he was a stellar student. Among the workers, he is at "the bottom of the heap."

Later, the Great Depression puts Tony in the first wave of miners to lose their jobs; Vita, having taken up with another man, does not accept his proposal. Tony's younger brother, Johnny, tells the sad tale of his brother's unraveling.

Told against a harsh, torn, and pillaged landscape, *Steel* is a moving novel about family loyalties, the beauty and warmth of young love, and the tragedy of shattered dreams.

KRISTINE MORRIS (January / February 2022)

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