Clarion Review

General

The King's Beacon
Terry Dillon
AuthorHouse
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Terry Dillon, author of the well-received nonfiction account *Light Me a Candle*, tries his hand at fiction in his novel *The King's Beacon*. Set in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the Aire Valley of Yorkshire, England, Dillon's story is a quiet one that pays homage to both its era and its setting. The times of which he writes—not terribly long ago, yet far removed from the present day and its technological intrusions—seem simple and relatively uncomplicated, even when troubles arise.

Dillon's protagonist, Peter, is a schoolteacher starting out in his first job. Dillon includes an explanation of the English school system in which, at age eleven, students are "split, the so-called brightest going to grammar schools and the others going to secondary modern schools." Peter teaches in the latter, with perhaps more than its share of less motivated pupils. Time in the teachers' lounge is spent discussing how to handle difficulties with students. "Take the class I've just had," Peter comments. "They can be incredibly annoying and that Joe Webster is a real problem." Little does Peter know that Joe Webster will continue to both plague and inspire him over the eight years that follow.

Joe's story, interwoven throughout the novel, both highlights and condemns aspects of parenting, teaching, and educational systems in general. With parents who refuse to acknowledge a greater problem, believing that all their son needs is "a good wallop," and unenlightened teachers who joke about learning disorders, Joe is at a serious disadvantage. Knowing that he will never qualify to continue his education under the English system, he accepts that he is a lost cause, and only Peter seems to disagree. In encouraging Joe's fledgling desire to play a musical instrument, Peter uncovers a hidden talent in the boy, yet it is almost too little, too late. With praise and patience, however, Peter fosters that talent, giving Joe "something to hang on to" even when other aspects of his life go awry.

The author incorporates tales of family life in the seventeenth-century cottage on the moor where Peter and his wife are raising their three young children. As parents, the two try to balance the isolation of living ten miles out of town with the benefits of the moor's fresh air, freedom of space, and solitude, a dilemma faced by many who consider leaving the rat race for a calmer locale. Dillon interjects historical detail about the area and the traditional laws governing the moors, and anyone who has enjoyed visiting the area or reading about it will be intrigued.

The King's Beacon provides a peaceful read for a cold winter's evening, although readers used to livelier fare may complain that for much of the book, *nothing happens*. Those seeking breathtaking adventure may be better served elsewhere. For those who enjoy quieter reading, however, including readers of middle school and high school age, Dillon's book is a beautifully written tale. The only flaw worth mentioning is the author's propensity for using "as to" far too often. "As to when," "as to where," and many more instances grate in their excessive usage. While it is unclear whether this is simply an accepted English speech pattern or a bad habit, readers may find it distracting.

In all, Dillon offers a superbly written book about lives lived in what feels like a long-ago time in a faraway place, with characters who are all too human, and a setting that is simply divine.

Cheryl Hibbard