ForeWord Reviews

HISTORICAL

The Quickening
Michelle Hoover
Other Press
978-059051346-0
(Jul 13, 2010)

“Her heart beat through her skin and the skin jumped, the hard bone of a child’s elbow or knee in its womb.” Michelle Hoover documents the difficult lives of two farmwomen who raise crops and families and even assist each other in childbirth in the upper Midwestern plains during the first part of the twentieth century. The story is told through the alternating voices of two women. Enidina Current, a big woman with rough hands, who describes her red hair as “combed smooth to lessen my height,” grew up doing farm work, while her nearest neighbor, Mary Morrow, was brought up by a mother who demanded she stay pure, learn to play piano, and serve tea. Both women wrap their lonely lives around their children; for additional comforts, one has a happy marriage and the other has religion. Through the comparison of daily events, especially during the Depression years, the reader is led to judge what constitutes contentment.

Hoover portrays her characters deliberately, with physical description, thought processes, and body language that conveys emotion. Set against the bone-wearying work of farm life whose success depends on human fortitude and the fickleness of the weather—hot blowing winds of drought, unmerciful rainstorms, and flooding—the author illuminates the strengths and foibles of the two women. She often uses household chores and items to thicken the richness of the action. Describing Enidina’s chores, she writes, “The light of my kerosene lamp fell against the skin of hogs hung to smoke.” In Mary’s reflection of her infatuation with the preacher, she notices, “the radiance he wore was a mirror of my own, seeing him.”

Also figuring into the novel’s message are the wives’ relationships with their husbands. The types of men they marry befit the protagonists’ opposite natures. Enidina’s thoughtful husband, Frank, listens to her father go on for fifteen minutes about his wife’s cooking, realizing that he is talking about food to entice his old, sick dog to get up and eat. In contrast, Mary’s husband, Jack, is mean. During hog-killing time, “he seemed to liven at the sight of his wife and the filth she hated, and he caught her against his chest…and wouldn’t let go…until her dress and hair were covered with waste.”

For accurate and thorough character analyses within a harsh setting, Hoover, a Bread

Loaf Writer's Conference Scholar, a Philip Roth Writer-in-Residence, and a MacDowell Fellow, is among the best. Lovers of historical fiction will choose *The Quickening* as a favorite and will often ponder its fine points.

Mary Popham