ForeWord Reviews

HISTORICAL

The Rope Catcher: a novel
Larry Stillman
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“Suppose one day you actually get what you’ve wished for … what happens then?” That question permeates a satisfying historical novel by Larry Stillman, a story that delves into a little discussed era to draw out struggles and concerns common to the human experience, and particularly significant to a group of people who helped end a war that tore apart the world.

The Rope Catcher draws on other powerful themes, such as finding your place in the world, especially when the world doesn’t want to accept you. It’s about the American Indian experience and soldiers returning from war. It’s about giving it all you’ve got and still struggling. And it’s the story of the fight between tradition and change.

In Stillman’s tale, Navajo Jimmie Goodluck longs to escape the reservation, a place that offers little hope or purpose. It is World War II, so he joins the marines. They assign him and other young Navajos to help develop a top-secret communications code based on the Navajo language after all other codes have been broken. “The cavalry finally has sense to bring in the Indians,” he quips. Jimmie and others create the mission-essential code, risk their lives in valiant battle, and ultimately help win the war. Eager to leave those horrors behind, but not the military brotherhood, Jimmie returns home. Now he must find himself again, discover a new purpose, and regain the acceptance he once knew. And he must also bring positive change to his people, starting with the reservation. For “there are always wars to fight.” But with a people hesitant to abandon their traditions, this mission may be his hardest yet.

The story offers a clear, compelling narrator’s voice and makes the Navaho experience and viewpoint understandable. The writing is strong, with a crisp narrative style that presents historical insights seamlessly. Although that voice takes a few pages to get used to, the plot brings vivid action filled with strong characters. And while jumps in time occasionally make things a little choppy, this is easily overlooked. This book presents an insider’s look at a fascinating part of history.

Fans of historical fiction will enjoy this book, as will anyone interested in World War II, the Native American experience, or the code talkers themselves. For anyone else who loves

good fiction, it’s simply a likeable read. Along the way, it’ll make readers think about their own dreams and about the lebnghts they might go to fight for them and make a difference. After all, as the author writes, “What happens after your dream comes true? … You fight to keep that dream alive. You don’t let anything—or anyone—take it away from you.”

Diane Gardner