Clarion Review

General

Time's Fool
Terra Ziporyn
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Five Stars (out of Five)

Galton Morrow is a prominent married Boston doctor with a thriving practice in the early 20th century. For all his success however he is consumed with questions about his parentage.

His father and mother were acolytes of the utopian missionaries of the cult-like Oneida Colony an upstate New York sect that in the mid-19th century was dedicated to serving the Almighty. The elders of course wielded the power including determining who would mate with whom and when. It was a “scientific experiment”: a belief that by mating the finest and fittest among them a crop of morally intellectually and physically superior progeny would result.

What makes the story so compelling is that it’s told through diary entries — from Galton’s writings circa 1907 and long gone from the colony to Josiah who in 1867 may or may not have fathered him. There in fact lies the problem: Josiah clearly loved the woman who became Galton’s mother but the elders refused the match attempting unsuccessfully to force separations between them and compelling all involved to procreate with others. Thus the ambiguity surrounding Galton’s parentage.

Along with those diaries meanwhile is a young woman who catches Galton’s fancy. Now he too is caught between his wife who he loves and a younger miss who could easily be his mistress. The story therefore comes full circle: the travails of a 19th century quasi-religious sect on one end its aftermath on the other.

Throughout the book the author displays an unfailing and often phenomenal attention to detail from sentence syntax period vocabulary and idiomatic misspellings to subtly crafted moments that ceaselessly carries the narrative forward. If it’s one of the leanest novels ever written it’s forgivable since character is never sacrificed — quite the opposite. The extensive bibliography also testifies to the author’s commitment to accuracy.

Unlike such similar works as *84 Charing Cross Road Time’s Fool* burrows deeper: At

stake is Galton’s very identity. As he moves through each diary painstakingly translating them from the secret code in which they were written he reflects upon his own life choices — a childless if loving marriage; his devotion to treating women with sexually transmitted diseases. In the end not only can he forgive his forebears but also at last he can confront the object of his affections and make a choice that the reader at the start of the book would never have imagined him capable of doing.