Clarion Review

General

Too Soon a Man
Donovan Harrison
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Four Stars (out of Five)

While most kids his age are out playing 12-year-old Billy Harshburger is helping his brothers Floyd Kevin and twins Joe and Jim string up their alcoholic father for nearly killing Kevin with a buggy whipping. A sad day for the boys even sadder for their old man formerly a decent but depression-poor cotton farmer on the homestead near Cheyenne Oklahoma. And a shocking way for Billy to begin his first person story as told by retired Cheyenne-born schoolteacher Donovan Harrison. But it's Billy's first step towards adulthood even if he does become a man far too soon.

Despite its chilling start Billy's coming-of-age story soon develops into a heart-warming romance of inspiration and courageous accomplishments. Between his daily chores Billy glories in getting straight A's at school. But he hates having rich girl Betty Ann Payne sit beside him on the bus every day especially when it gets him into a schoolyard fight that he wins but for which he gets three paddle smacks from the Principal and six more from Ma. Then it's 1941 and with America at war first Kevin Billy's favorite brother and then the twins enlist even as Billy is bullied for his Germanic surname. But fast fists and a short temper keep his bullies at bay. He Floyd and Ma draw extra work on the farm especially when they get a neighbour's spread at a price they can't refuse. Billy's soon managing it proving he can shoulder a man's workload and make a man's decisions as he suffers through a broken romance or two the hardships of farming and the difficulties of balancing schoolwork and daily chores.

Fate intrudes as well. Kevin is reported Missing in Action and Billy's blossoming romance with Betty Ann results in a pregnancy and a marriage that suits him fine but rekindles her feuding father's hatred for the Harshburgers. There's more trouble when war-scarred Kevin returns to start selling illegal whiskey and gets himself killed by the rival Biggs brothers. He's quickly avenged when Floyd the twins who are also back from the front and Billy now a teenaged father but still too soon a man mete out their rough justice as the Biggs' judge jury and executioners.

Harrison's got a talent for imagery in phrases like Billy's "That Floyd can hear a granddaddy-long-legs tip-toeing across a silk handkerchief." He describes Billy's fight scenes with slam-bang action and his love scenes with tenderness and sensuality. His characters are real folks good and bad and Billy and Betty Ann mature from kids into adults even though they're still in their late teens when the story ends. There are several potential story threads left hanging such as Kevin's wartime adventures the possible discovery of Pa's grave the executioners of the Biggs brothers—even a possible a Harshburger dynasty now that baby William Dale Harshburger has arrived. If Harrison takes up the challenges his new novels are bound to be worth reading.

M. Wayne Cunningham