

Wild Blue Ponders: War

Max Blue

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These are thoroughly American tales—individualistic, friendly, and direct.

With *Wild Blue Ponders*, Max Blue skillfully combines elements from his previous novels to deliver a new, chronological work about young American men and women caught up in war and coping with peace.

The book is comprised of stories from a bevy of periods and events—including both world wars, the Great Depression, the Korean War, the cold war, the civil rights movement, and so-called academic and drug wars. Pieces of short fiction illustrate how the people that we meet and the experiences that we have broaden our perspectives.

While there is no overarching narrative, the stories are held together by common themes; in this collection, theme takes precedence over plot. Each story can be read individually, even those excerpted from previous novels. Some characters are recurring.

Historical figures and anecdotes play in, with a major tip of the hat to Woodrow Wilson, who gets admiring references. The book also approaches the moral dilemma of the atomic bomb. Commentary from sailors Mickey Michigan and Sunshine McGee bring the nuclear weapon's use down to a personal level.

Storytelling techniques, like employing dialogue and framing discussions without rancor, allow for exploratory conversations around social land mines. Takedowns of pompous professors lost in the swamps of higher education are an amusing addition. The book is neither careful to avoid offense nor deliberately offensive.

The narrative voice holds attention: wry, sometimes hokey, sometimes outright hilarious, it is consistent, natural, observant, and distinctive. It could be best described as thoroughly American, not so much confined to a region as simply individualistic, friendly, and direct. Those qualities carry over to the characters. Most are the sort who face troubles from outright danger to everyday frustrations, but who do so with optimism or at least good-humored resignation.

Characters are engaging—funny, often imaginative, sometimes whimsical. Teenage twins Ted and Ed are memorable, perhaps because they become representative of the American experience circa World War I. Ted, seeking adventure, wants to head for the front line; Ed tags along, but his life in Europe goes in a different direction. Many of the book's anecdotes are similar buddy tales, though with the twins, there's more backstory, which deepens and enriches their particular appeal.

Detailed observations bring settings to life, from places with champagne down to bloody French battlefields. This is most noticeable as French wartime settings are brought to life. Other settings are more neutral. Romantic scenes are captured with respectfully limited details, but the romance still feels real. Baseball receives multiple homages as America's pastime. Dialogue echoes period films and news reports.

Wild Blue Ponder is solid historical fiction that takes a quick march through twentieth-century America, observing

events both mundane and magnificent.

GARY PRESLEY (November 27, 2017)

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