Clarion Review

Historical

With A Heavy Heart: Confessions of an Unwilling Spy
Sam Taggart
iUniverse
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Austrian engineer and German spy, J.L. Stein, leads readers through the dark labyrinth of his family's history, including tales of concentration camps, Nazis, and the KKK. In this ambitious novel, Sam Taggart balances the evil with feminist activists and the heroic efforts of a few moral, hard-working people.

In the 1930s, Austria was severely troubled with a struggling economy, rising unemployment, and sinking hopes. The country sought a savior and many good-intentioned citizens encouraged Hitler's rise to power. To be sure, they certainly didn't anticipate the coming turmoil and genocide of World War II. Helena, Stein's Jewish mother and a leader of the Austrian feminist movement, sees what's coming. Her writings make her a target when Hitler moves into Austria. To save her youngest son, she helps him flee to the United States and Stein ends up in Benton, Arkansas, as one of the main engineers in the local aluminum plant, which is important to the war effort. When the Germans capture Helena and ship her off to Mauthausen, a notorious work camp, Stein reluctantly agrees to spy for the Germans in exchange for his mother's safety. Stein's spy efforts remain secret in Benton and the community considers him a respected citizen.

Taggart also frames the Nazi-era story of Stein with a message-in-the-bottle ploy set in present day.

Taggert brings together all of the elements for a fine World War II drama, but falls short of crafting a fully developed tale. Uneven writing plagues the novel and reportage takes up the bulk of the book. At other times, strong descriptive writing shines, "Massive floodlights illuminated the plant site, and the roar of the giant earthmovers and trucks created a constant drone."

Characters and scenes are minimally developed. The very subject of the book lends

suspense, but without careful crafting, the intensity is diffused and disrupted. The narrator's passive tone often takes away much of the drama: "It was Franz in the morgue, and it had been a hit and run."

Readers may quickly tire as they attempt to sort out various political groups and family dynamics that have no impact or involvement in Stein's tale. For example, Helena's good friend is killed. Her death demonstrates the Nazi disregard for human life and the sense of power they enjoyed, but the lesson would have been more valuable if readers were given the chance to bond with the young woman. The denouement gains strength as all factions come together into a predictable but satisfying ending. The author writes best when focused on small town activities, and he inserts some much needed humor when describing a local ball team and the escapades of its coach.

Although the author's research lends an air of authority, the novel is over-reaching. In the end, readers who are hooked on World War II and Holocaust fiction may find this novel entertaining.

Dawn Goldsmith