

BOOK REVIEW: THE WINTER SOLDIER

Daniel Mason, *The Winter Soldier: A Novel*, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2018, ISBN 978-0-316-47760-4

Here is a gem of a novel, written by a physician/psychiatrist, Daniel Mason, that will entertain and enthrall—and challenge the reader to explore the mind’s machinations in the experience of life’s vicissitudes.

The story’s vertebral column is that of a naive Viennese medical student conscripted into military service as a field surgeon during the time of The Great War that forever altered the political course of Europe. But the clear focus is on the brain—at a time when introduction of x-rays raised the fanciful possibility of seeing into that organ’s substance to explain thoughts, feelings, and emotions, in much the same anatomical manner as do sensory and motor innervation.

The storyline involves Lucius Krzelewski, the inquisitive medical student who finds himself caught up in the grim world of battlefield warfare, and Sister Margarete, a perhaps enigmatic persona who operates a remote and dilapidated field hospital located in a converted and ill-equipped church, to which Lucius has been assigned. Aside from suffering the typical war injuries, for which amputation was the sole recourse, patients brought to this facility—by truck, horse, or wheelbarrow—often show perplexing signs of “shell shock,” (subsequently termed “battle fatigue” and today referred to as PTSD), but which was then interpreted as cowardice or malingering. Lucius is fascinated by this syndrome and tries to apply his nascent medical skills and his penchant for compassion to heal them, but learns that his efforts are inappropriate in an environment where soldiers must be rapidly rehabilitated and returned quickly and expeditiously to the battlefield. In one instance, Lucius’ earnest ministrations backfire, with momentous consequences, producing in him overwhelming remorse and guilt. Later, Lucius embarks on a frantic search for a significant missing person, leading him to fraught encounters and a life-changing self-realization. The novel’s denouement is at once shocking, yet immensely comforting.

Driving the tale and commanding the reader’s attention is the author’s impressive storytelling skill and rich prose. One’s vocabulary will be instantly expanded when encountering phrases like “a caracole of stairs,” “the listless fiacres,” and “umbrels of a wild carrot.” Expressing Sister Margarete’s advice to her newly-arrived medical assistant, Mason writes:

[This soldier will] be dead by morning... We keep him warm. If he wakes up we tell him he’s home; if he calls you his father, you call him son. Perhaps it is different in Vienna, but this is how we do it here.

Speaking of the time when a distraught Lucius leaves the relatively safer compound of the field hospital to search for the missing person and finds himself in the center of an awesome battle, Mason describes the scene by saying:

He leapt and hit the ground, tucking his head inside his hands. Horses thundered past him, kicking up clods of dirt. He stumbled up, still trying to ward off the flying hooves. Gunfire churned up the ground around him. He ran...crossed the clearing...up a slope to where a man possessed of some authority was shouting field commands, reaching him just as a bullet struck the officer's neck and knocked him to the earth. "Down!" someone, somewhere, shouted. Stunned, staring, Lucius hit the ground. A few feet away, the officer clawed at his throat, gasping as blood spurted between his fingers.

This reviewer finds the author's writing style enormously appealing, reminiscent, perhaps, of Pasternak (*Dr. Zhivago*), or Hemingway (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*). *The Winter Soldier* brings to mind the wonder, the struggles, and the emotional growth of a young and impressionable medical student thrust into the practical realities of an unforgiving world.

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