

Century explores history and family relationships

Century
Ray Smith
Stoddart Publishing

review by Karen Heaton
Century, by Ray Smith, contains two novellas: "Family" and "The Continental". Of the two, "Family" is far better because it is more accessible to the reader, but both are well worth reading.

The first novella, "Family", consists of four stories about the Seymour family: Bill, Gwen, and their children Ian and Jane. I deliberately call them stories rather than chapters because it is not until the third story that you recognize the relationships between the characters and the stories.

The opening story "In the Night, Heinrich Himmler..." is a disturbing beginning for Smith's book. It is the story of Jane Seymour as told by an unnamed narrator/novelist. Jane is an intelligent woman tormented by nightmares about helplessness and rape. The truly disturbing element of this section is not the story itself; it is the narrator's admission that Jane does not exist. The narrator stresses that this is only fiction, but the rest of the novella is concerned with this fiction.

This story sets up the concern with illusion and reality present in the rest of the book. Smith undercuts the reader's assumptions by having the narrator denounce the story and claim to be drawing on "real" incidents of the victimization of women. Whether or not the reader can identify this narrator as Smith or these incidents as actual is uncertain and, because of this uncertainty, effective.

"The Princess, the Boeing, and the Hot Pastrami Sandwich", the second story, is as delightful as its title suggests. The story is

about Ian's and his wife Stephanie's grief at the death of their daughter. In prose almost like poetry, Smith creates a moving tale of mourning, reconciliation, and hope. The section concludes with a marvelous list cataloguing the human spectrum of New York City and mimicking the Twelve Days of Christmas. This section is short but is the best section in Century.

The third section, "The Garden of the Hesperides", draws together the characters of the previous sections in the first person narrative of Bill Seymour, a retired dog-owner who plans a garden and mourns the dead: his dead wife, his dead daughter, his dead grandchild, and everyone he was unable to help. The section works because of the juxtaposition of his thoughts and a history of gardening. While this section, like the previous one, contains a conflict between landscape and human relationships, unlike the previous section, the ending is despair. Bill trades his garden for a theoretical one.

"Serensissima", the tale of Gwen, must be read with the previous section in mind because it offers a view of Gwen totally unrecognizable from her husband's conception of her. Which Gwen is true? The self-complacent woman who grew gardens or the femme fatale desperately seeking sensation and love? This fascinating contradiction is flawed by the over-obvious symbolism of a mask, but again the visual imagery saves the story, and the novella, from triteness.

The second novella, "The Continental", continues this absorption with illusions. "The Continental" is divided into two parts: "Red Velvet, Black Lace", and "Red Banner, Black Boots". The central character is Kenniston Thorson, lover of art and sensation. The novella moves from Paris in the gay '90's to

Germany between the World Wars and foreshadows the rise of fascism. What is interesting in this novella is the change in Thorson between the sections. In the first, he is content to experience the sensations; but in the second, he is looking for something more. His companion, Lulu, however, is only interested in sensation. The conclusion is bleak despite, or perhaps because of, Lulu's laughter.

"The Continental", especially the first part, would be more interesting to someone with

an art history background or maybe an intensive knowledge of Paris in the 1960's. Thorson's discussions about colour, balance, and light are tedious, slightly pretentious, and yet another "portrait of the artist as a young man."

Century contains such vivid visual images and such well-written prose that its minor flaws or occasional heavy-handed symbolism and pretention are forgotten. It is a beautiful message of despair and a wonderful, wonderful book.

Music of the globe

review by Nancy Fischer

Is music the universal language? Well if you were in attendance at the First Annual World Music Concert on Saturday, January 16th, you would realize that music is at least of universal appeal. The evening was a fascinating and enlightening one.

The program began with the Caledonia Pipe band, dressed in the traditional Scottish kilts and presenting Highland bagpipe music. The Philippine Community focused on percussive instruments, making use of both bamboo and brass for this purpose. A main portion of this act's success rested on dancing. The costumes were vivid, and especially notable was the "Tinkling", which featured a boy and a girl dancing between two bamboo poles used as percussive instruments and culminating in an extremely harrowing pace. The dancers were charming, combining grace with agility.

The Edmonton Tamil Cultural Association

presented Southern Indian Music, and the haunting vocal lines were not so much accompanied as woven with the drum, stringed instrument and drone. The Rainy-hatara group used wooden pipes and stringed instruments in their zestful presentation of Chilean music. Their energy was contagious, and their invitation to join in clapping gave the audience an outlet for their own energy. The Wild Rose Society presented Indian Music which, as Vinod Bhardwaj told us, in contrast to Western music placed importance on melodic rather than on harmonic development. The concert ended most fittingly with the exuberant Trembita Folk Orchestra and dancers. The ebullient Hopak dance was full of impressive almost unbelievable leaps.

Because music reflects not only a society's entertainment but also its traditions, the evening was valuable in the glimpse it provided of other cultures as well as its level of performance. For one, look forward to the Second Annual World Music Concert.

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