

BOOK REVIEWS

Our Lady of Steerage, Steven Mayoff

Bunim & Bannigan, 2015

Review by Ian Colford

In his first novel, Steven Mayoff, author of the prize-winning story collection *Fatted Calf Blues*, has written an elegiac and insightful chronicle of many lives spanning many years. In 1923, 19-year-old Mariasse Knyszinski leaves her Kraków home in order to follow her cousin Piotr, who has left Poland for the promise of a new life in Canada. For a teenage girl it is a drastic and perhaps reckless step. Undeniably, she is motivated by love, but she is also driven to escape a country that, at best, can offer its young people a continuation of the miserable hand-to-mouth existence endured by their parents. She is horrified at the thought of ending up like her mother, tethered to a man filled with bitterness and living a life of fear and servitude. This is the fate she is certain awaits her if she stays at home.

Mariasse books passage on the S.S. Montmartre. Here she meets a young Jewish couple, Betye and Shulim, who have just lost their young son to illness. Betye, in her grief, is unable to cope with her infant daughter, Dvorah, so it falls to Mariasse to care for the child as the ship sails west. Mariasse does not realize it at the time, but as she strolls the decks of the ship with the baby in her arms a lifelong connection between her and Dvorah is being forged, a connection that will exert a profound influence over the trajectory both their lives take and which will be broken only with Dvorah's death thirty-nine years later.

Mayoff has structured his story in a non-linear fashion, opening the novel in 1962 with Dvorah's funeral. The action then jumps back to 1923, with Mariasse engineering her escape from Kraków, and from there skips back and forth in time. But

Mayoff's approach is strategic rather than haphazard. The scenes set later in the 1920s and in the 1930s and 1940s dramatize key events in the lives of his characters and gradually build the story, piece by piece. Admittedly, as a narrative strategy, this is risky and makes the story more difficult to follow than a straightforward narrative built chronologically. But it also enables the reader to not only interpret later events in light of earlier ones, but to do the reverse. Mayoff generates great suspense by illuminating his characters' motives in scenes that occur decades apart in real time but are situated contiguously in the book. By showing us his characters at various stages of life, as they look wistfully into the past and hopefully toward the future, he infuses his story with a sense of time passing and of time having passed, giving a novel of modest length the sweeping breadth of a historical blockbuster. It is a feat of literary dexterity that he appears to carry off with relative ease.

Our Lady of Steerage tells a complex tale, one that revolves around people making difficult choices of personal, moral and religious significance and living with or suffering from the consequences. At the centre of it all is Mariasse Knyszinski, who as a young woman bravely throws herself into the unknown and as a result of a fateful decision reaps joy and sorrow in equal measure. In the world that Steven Mayoff conjures up in his wise and psychologically penetrating novel memory is sometimes fluid, but it is impossible to escape the past. At the end of life, the most we can hope for is reconciliation.