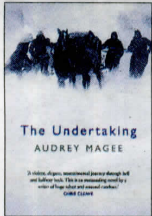


Books



FICTION
THE UNDERTAKING
★★★★☆
Audrey Magee
Atlantic, £12.99
(Express Books,
£11.49)

WHAT HORRORS would you undertake to ensure your freedom? What are the limits of the pain that you can endure, both physically and psychologically? Such are the questions probed by Audrey Magee in her accomplished debut novel.

It explores the moral dilemmas facing the German soldier Peter Faber in his quest to escape the Second World War's Eastern Front. This engaging narrative unflinchingly exposes the brutality of warfare and the effects of the political on the most intimately personal spheres of human life.

A wedding is the simple yet effective plot device driving *The Undertaking*. Yet this is a highly unusual wedding, for both participants undertake it without meeting each other. Within minutes Peter Faber finds himself married to a woman in Berlin

that he has seen only in a photograph from a thousand miles away. At the same moment Katharina Spinell takes part in the same ceremony witnessed by her mother and father, her part in a war pact that will ensure honeymoon leave for Peter and a widow's pension for her in the event of his death.

Although this is initially a marriage of convenience, when the pair finally meet during Peter's visit to his new wife in Berlin, a bond develops between them. Even when they are again parted, when Peter returns to the demands of the warfront, it is the thought of Katharina that elevates Peter's spirits and injects life-saving hope.

Novelists have depicted the horrors of the Second World War from myriad perspectives, for both adults and children, from Captain Corelli's *Mandolin* to *Catch-22* to *Goodnight Mister Tom*. Magee shows the

perspective of someone who enters the Nazi party hierarchy, as Katharina is pressured to do by her parents.

In the centenary of the First World War and in a contemporary world still riddled with violence, Magee shows how novelists can shed insight into the moral complexities of war beyond the bald statistics of news headlines.

Most poignantly this novel traces the emotional undertaking of being parted from loved ones. Magee is particularly skilful at charting the passage of time and its effects upon the body and mind.

The pace of the plot seems to overtake itself at times but Magee is most assured lingering over the telling details; Katharina worries that her skin has aged since she last saw her beloved and a physically toughened Peter is "no longer accustomed to comfort and warmth".

The success of this ambitious novel is in how Magee stylistically undertakes her subject matter. She favours third-person realism, stripping her prose of sentimentality and conjuring vivid and evocative images so that we can smell, see, taste and touch the harsh conditions of wartime, "the swirling dust and grit", the barbed wire. She also takes us on a moving journey through the emotional hinterlands of grief and guilt.

ANITA SETHI



ACCOMPLISHED: Audrey Magee

