

Carol Smallwood's Bookshelf

from Midwest Book Review, Vol. 20 Num. 6, June 2020

Denise David's *Against Forgetting: War, Love, and After War*

Shanti Arts Publishing

http://shantiarts.co/uploads/files/def/DAVID_FORGETTING.html

1951651316, \$15.95, Paperback, 78 pages, May 5, 2020

The year 2020 marks seventy-five years since the end of World War II; *Against Forgetting: War, Love, and After War* is a poetry collection about people living the war - a legacy of first-hand memories preserved by a researcher scholar, the daughter of a war bride.

Smallwood: What is your literary background, and education?

I am a teacher and a writer. I taught writing and literature for over twenty-five years at a community college in upstate New York. As meaning-making creatures, our stories help us understand who we are and allow us to make sense of the world. My formal education includes earning a Ph.D., but I have never stopped learning from my students and from my own writing. I have published a number of academic articles as well as poetry and narrative non-fiction.

Smallwood: Your preface shared you did research and interviews about World War II war brides. How did you get in touch with them?

Ever since I was a child, I have been fascinated with people whose mothers were war brides. My mother had several friends from England, women who had married soldiers during the war, but when I was a child, it did not occur to me that it was strange that all of these English women were living in a small town in upstate New York. As I grew older I was more and more fascinated with the experience of war brides. The estimates, while hard to verify, suggest that more than a million women married soldiers and left their homelands after World War II. As I began writing and researching the history of the times as well as my mother's experiences, I wanted to understand the fuller context of the experience for other war brides as well. I read anything related to the subject - history books, stories about war brides, accounts written by war brides, old newspaper articles. I drove to meet war brides or their children whenever I could to speak with them about their experiences. But the most important connection I made was when I discovered a national organization, the World War II War Brides Association, a group consisting of war brides from over fifty countries. My mother and I began attending the annual reunions held in a different American city each year.

Smallwood: Your forty-nine poems are divided into *War: Love, After War*. Please comment about the role of women then and now that you've observed:

The role of women during the war years is fascinating. It differed for women living in different countries, and I have tried to capture some of that in the poems, but since my grandmother and my mother lived in England during the war, I will speak a little about their experience. The war was fought in their back garden in a sense. My mother grew up in a large industrial city, Birmingham, England, which suffered nearly as much bombing as London, an enormous amount in other words. When we think of the Battle of Britain, we do not think of the women working in the factories that ran twenty-four hours a day building Spitfires, Hurricanes and bombs. So many of the men were away fighting overseas so it was left in large part to the women. I don't think we fully understand the tremendous burden on the women to hunker down in shelters with their children through long nights of bombing and then get up and go to work in the morning. When we speak of the home front, women were a huge part of that. And then, of course, for the war brides there was the issue of falling in love with a man from a foreign country and giving up all that was dear to them--country, family and friends to take a chance on the future. The war brides, women now in their eighties and nineties, were in so many ways creators of the peace after a devastating war.

Smallwood: Your poems includes such fascinating bits such as in "Tea Time" is noted: "In 1942, the British government purchased in order of weight: bullets, tea, artillery shells, bombs, and explosives." Please share with readers another:

Yes, my research has led me to all sorts of little stories, the smaller details that make history fascinating. For example, after the final bombing that demolished the British Museum, there were stories of ancient seeds stored inside the museum that sprouted into life after they were drenched with water used to put out the fires.

Smallwood: The era becomes so real by including such details as the wearing of lipstick (when available) in defiance of Hitler, and bombs in back gardens on Sunday dinnertime "against an azure sky." How were you able to select them?

The story of the plane in the back garden was told to me first by my grandmother and later by her son, my uncle. Neither of them ever forgot that story, and neither have I. My mother has talked often of how they all wore red lipstick to keep their spirits up in those days. To this day, my ninety-three year old mother does not go out without "a bit of lipstick." She is strong and resilient and carrying on.

Smallwood: In "Seeing the Same Place for the First Time" as a nine year old, you "see the enormity of my mother's decision." Please share with readers what you realized:

Until that moment, I had not realized how hard it must have been for my mother to choose between the love of her family, with whom she was very close and the love of a man, my father, an American soldier. When I saw my grandmother crying I understood a mother's sadness in a way I never had before. I knew this grief was something my mother always carried with her. In those days, America was a world away. It was not easy to get back to England, although in my mother's case, she was able to get back after about eighteen months when I was born, but many war brides reported that it was many, many years before they

could return "home" for a visit, frequently as many as ten years. Air travel was very expensive and travel by ship was not cheap either and it took nearly a week one way. Phone calls were rare if people even had a phone. For so many years, my mother stayed in touch with her family through letters, which she often cried when she received. Now, all these years later, my mother has managed to remain close to her family, with weekly phone calls and daily emails, but she still remembers her devastating homesickness at first.

Smallwood: What are you working on now?

Currently, I am working on my mother's story, the life of a girl who grew up in the midst of a war and married a man from across the sea. Life would not be as she expected it, but she, like all of us, had to find her own strength. My book pieces together the shards of experience that connect to form a life. When I began the book, my question was whether or not my mother had made the right decision, but I have come to realize that the real story is who we become because of the decisions we make.

Carol Smallwood, MLS, MA, Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award recipient, is a literary reader, judge, interviewer; her 13th poetry collection is *Thread, Form, and Other Enclosures* (Main Street Rag, 2020).

Carol Smallwood
Interviewer