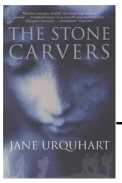
The stone carvers

The Stone Carvers



The Canadian National Vimy Memorial sits on a preserved battlefield in France where the Canadian Expeditionary Force took part in the Battle of Vimy Ridge during World War I. The huge marble monument took 11 years to build and has giant human sculptures representing sacrifice, mourning, and strength and includes over 11,000 names of Canadian soldiers missing in action.

In Jane Urquhart's novel *The Stone Carvers*, we meet three fictional people who wind up working on this magnificent monument. Their lives are transformed both by the beauty of art and the horrors of war.

Klara and Tilman Becker grow up in rural Canada in a German immigrant community at the turn of the century. Their grandfather is a wood carver with high hopes for Tilman to learn the master craft. While Tilman has a natural carving ability, he is proves unable to stay on the farm. Even as early as 12, Tilman must migrate. Nothing his family does can keep him on the farm, not even a chain.

Klara learns to carve from her grandfather and how to tailor at an early age. She remains deeply rooted on the farm, earning a living for herself and her father. But even steadfast Klara is eventually moved by both personal grief and the greater losses of a county deeply wounded by war.

This book isn't about World War I specifically (you learn very little about the actual Battle of Vimy Ridge), but instead it is about overcoming grief even if that grief is indeterminable. I found myself cheering on the characters when they had trouble articulating in a relationship. In that sense, I am reminded of Erdrich's *The Master Butchers Singing Club* and one of my all time favorites *Deafening* by Frances Itani. Both of these novels are also set in immigrant communities rural areas (one in North Dakota and one in Canada) and have characters who participate in World War I. The themes of language, communication and sound in *Deafening* specifically are truly amazing. I hope rural World War I novels don't seem too obscure!

Posted by sbowman on February 22, 2012

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