
“Stephen Baird Robbins: hunter, hotel manager, drunk.” The Inspector General of the internment camp at the Mountain Park Hotel in Hot Springs, North Carolina, describes himself thus. This work of historical fiction is based on the little-known but true story of the 1917 imprisonment of over 2,700 German sailors stranded in the United States at the beginning of World War I. Many of the characters in this novel did in fact live in the area during the time which Robbins, the fictitious narrator, describes. This includes the folk singer Jane Gentry and Major Jack Rumbough, owner of the Mountain Park Hotel and his family mansion Rutland, which is now the tourist vacation destination known as the Mountain Magnolia Inn.

"The novel has to do with love and war; and because of the war, it has to do with life and death. On a cultural as well as personal level, it concerns both imprisonment and escape. …These [are] very real, very paradoxical themes,” according to the author in an email to this reviewer. The book’s title, taken from a traditional ballad, appears suited to the work. Humans are only here for a very short time; love is often short lived; and the German soldiers were only in their hotel prison a short while.

Some special strengths of the novel include colorful characterization and vivid description of the time and setting, as well as the intrigue and mystery portrayed. When Robbins meets Anna Ulmann, a photographer from New York, on the train on the way to the funeral of his late mentor and employer, Major Rumbough, we sense the beginnings of a romantic involvement. Ulmann is seeking independence from her rich husband, a physician who sees no need for her to have a career of her own. (This character appears to be based on Doris Ulmann (1884-1934), a photojournalist.) Intrigue is introduced early on with a plot by German prisoners to kill German officers, and then later when Robbins’ cousin Roy, the local sheriff and a mean-spirited womanizer, uses a German prisoner as bait to attempt to murder Stephen Robbins himself.

Author Terry Roberts’ ancestors have lived and farmed in Madison County, the story’s setting, since the 1700s and both his parents were born in nearby Anderson Cove. This is his first work of fiction although he has written literary criticism and works on the educational program Paideia. Currently Roberts is Director of the National Paideia Center; he holds degrees from three North Carolina universities, including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The author’s attractive web site (www.ashorttimetostayhere.com) includes special features which make this novel amenable to teaching and group reading: discussion questions, an historical timeline, a link to photographs of German detainees and the miniature village they built (including a church and a Swiss Alps house), a reader’s guide, and a link to an article which gives much of the history on which the story is based.
Violence, death, and sex are dealt with tastefully; the book could be read by mature young adults and older readers. *A Short Time to Stay Here* is recommended for North Carolina collections which specialize in historical fiction. It also would be useful for teaching the use of primary sources as a basis for fiction works, as well as the teaching of research methods. And one can easily see this book as a movie.

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