

A 1 June 2012 - The Underling by Ian McKercher

I bought this novel directly from the author at the Glebe Garage Sale last Saturday. Apparently it took him 30 years to write this book so of course I had to buy it.

A lot of thoughts and ideas jumbled around in my head while reading the Underling. I am not sure if this book is to be part thriller and part story about the work ethic of the generation of teens who came of age during the Depression. Is it a commentary on the shortcomings of the modern educational system? Or perhaps all of these things? Or perhaps none of them?

I read this book in a day and a half because it was pretty engrossing. I liked that it had a lot of dialogue because I like dialogue. I did not know too much about the Bank of Canada so I learned about bit about the history of the institution. It seems odd to think of a time when the banks issued their own currency.

Frances McFadden is a 1930s teen in Ottawa. She lost her sister to TB only a few months prior. Dad is absent and Mom works nights and pacifies her grief in a bottle of brandy. Money is tight but the McFaddens are not destitute. But it's 1934 and times are pretty tough. Some things have not changed though; Frances lives in the working class neighbourhood of Rochesterville. Parts of Rochester Street are still working class today. Funny how a neighbourhood has not changed too much in 70+ years.

Frances is only six weeks away from completing grade 11 at the High School of Commerce (part of Glebe Collegiate back then) where she is enrolled in a secretarial program learning practical skills like shorthand, typing, and accounting. She is given an opportunity to interview for a job with the soon to be created Bank of Canada. Reluctant at first, she agrees to the interview. She is interviewed by a Department of Finance economist Dr Wilbur Grace. Dr. Grace does not want a seasoned government secretary because they tend to be either inflexible or too entrenched in the culture of the federal government. Again, some things never change in 70+ years.

Frances impressed Dr. Grace at the interview and she is hired to set up a research agency for the new Bank of Canada. She sets up the agency using her smarts and can do attitude. She stumbles a few times but recovers and learns from these experiences. Frances is mature enough to run an office on her own, yet silly enough get drunk at the cottage and go skinny-dipping and to engage in philosophical conversations about penises.

By the end of the novel, in late August 1939, she is practically a spy smuggling gold out of Poland before the nazis can get their hands on it.

The thing in this novel that interested me the most was Frances' skills. Was Frances so capable because she was smart, skilled, hard working and ambitious? Or because she had to figure it out because it was 1934 and jobs were scarce? I find it very interesting that Frances was studying at the High School of Commerce. It appears that her education is based on actual practical skills that we do not see in today's modern schools. She can type, write shorthand, write press releases and do basic accounting. Could a grade 11 student do this today; all without Google, Wikipedia or Excel? The author taught at Glebe Collegiate so I am not sure if Frances' somewhat superior education is a commentary on today's educational system?

The only weakness with this book is that Frances is a little too mature and skilled at age 17. I would have liked her to make a few more mistakes. She is fearless. She gets into an argument with the Prime Minister. Granted she did not recognize R.B. Bennett, but still she stands her ground and basically kicks him out of her office. She seems to find solutions to every problem in a matter of seconds. No one is that good! This may be my own personal prejudice as I was an idiot at 17. I suspect deep down, I am jealous of Frances and her resourceful nature and fearlessness.

Obviously, since I read this book in a day and a half I liked it. The book ends just as Canada declares war on Germany which proves to be a great set up for a sequel if the author chooses to continue the story. Frances after 5 long years of work work work has finally met a guy. Will there be a relationship? Will he do his bit and join up or stay with the government? Will Frances continue to be a rising star within the government? So many ways to continue the story.