

2015

Book Review: The Wittenbergs: A Novel by Sarah Klassen

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Recommended Citation

Mock, Melanie Springer, "Book Review: The Wittenbergs: A Novel by Sarah Klassen" (2015). *Faculty Publications - Department of English*. 94.

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The Wittenbergs: A Novel. By Sarah Klassen. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press. 2013. Pp. 404. \$21.

In many ways, Sarah Klassen's novel, *The Wittenbergs*, turns on the question of family history and just how heavy a burden one family's past can weigh upon its current generations. For the Wittenbergs, the family at the center of Klassen's text, this sometimes unacknowledged weight carries with it certain consequences. Only a reformation of sorts can set the family free to understand their history in new, more hopeful, ways.

Klassen has made her name as an award-winning poet; this is her first effort as a novelist. Her poetic impulse makes *The Wittenbergs* a lovely reading experience, with striking images especially of the protagonist, Mia Wittenberg, contending with a sometimes harsh winter Manitoba landscape, and, later, with an equally challenging but no less beautiful Crimean summer. Although overall *The Wittenbergs* is a strong text, there are small clues that this is Klassen's initial foray into longer fiction—too many narrative strands being, perhaps, the most notable barrier to making this a flawless novel.

The book's plot is compelled forward by Mia, who is in her final year of high school and experiencing significant anxiety—as with most teens her age—about her identity, her future, and her place in the school's social order. But she must also contend with a family on the brink of collapse, a depressed mother, and two nephews who have been diagnosed with Fragile X, a genetic disorder that can cause significant developmental delays.

At the encouragement of her beloved English teacher, Mia begins an independent study, interviewing her grandmother, then writing the stories of

GranMarie's difficult Ukrainian childhood and her immigration to Canada. An endnote tells readers these stories were inspired by Klassen's mother, and there is a quality about them—about GranMarie's telling, and Mia's retelling—that suggest the experiences might be told and retold by Mennonites of a certain generation, faced with a grim upbringing in Russia, with the terror of political upheaval, and with a challenging journey overseas to a land completely foreign.

As Mia constructs stories from the pieces of her family's history, her world continues to fray. Her father, a principal at Mia's high school, becomes more distant, drawn like his daughter to the young English teacher, though for different reasons entirely; her mother descends further into depression; her sister, struggling to care for two children with disabilities, turns to a charismatic church for comfort, the Mennonite faith having failed to provide her the promise of healing she needs.

These crises are complicated and intensified by other events: a car accident; a suicide; GranMarie's illness and death. Such sorrow for Mia and her family is set against the backdrop of larger grief, the 1991 war in Iraq. Invited to a prayer meeting for the war at her Mennonite church, Mia prays for peace—for the Middle East certainly, but also for her mother and father, and her drug-addled friend, and her nephew. After the vigil, walking with a friend and her father into the frozen night, she sees a "glorious night sky," a portend suggesting all is not irreparably broken in Mia's world.

What begins the family's reformation—they are Wittenbergs, after all, and the theme of reformation thrums throughout the story—is a heritage trip taken by Mia and her parents to the Ukraine, ostensibly to scatter GranMarie's ashes on her motherland, but also to learn more of the Wittenberg family history about which Mia has been writing. Against the backdrop of the Soviet Union's collapse, the Wittenbergs are drawn closer together, both by the power of this journey, but also by an accident that challenges them to rely on each other—and on their daughter Alice, waiting anxiously for them in Manitoba.

Klassen faces difficult subjects head-on in *The Wittenbergs*: depression; suicide; substance abuse; marital infidelity; genetic disorders. At times, these seem a natural part of the unfolding story. At other times, the plot appears to strain under the weight of probability—so much difficulty and pain for one family and, specifically, for one young protagonist.

Still, through a number of narrative strands, Klassen capably explores our relationship to familial and ethnic history. The boys' Fragile X syndrome; Mia's interest in her family's history and Joseph's seeming initial disinterest in the same; GranMarie's tenuous hold on the stories of her past; even the Wittenberg family drift away from, and back to, their Mennonite heritage—these elements of the novel all raise intriguing questions about how our past defines who we now are, and who we wish to be. *The Wittenbergs* also challenges us to wonder whether we can ever really rewrite the past. Or, in the least, whether we can redeem parts of our stories that have broken us.

While the novel's denouement may feel a little too tidy for contemporary readers, it also suggests that redemption certainly is possible: for GranMarie, finally settled, her ashes scattered across a Ukrainian wheat field; for the

Wittenbergs, who find in each other the wholeness they've been seeking; and for Mia, affirmation that her own life, her own story, matters, even if the end has yet to be written.

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