PHOTOGRAPH BY CLASSIC STUDIOS

ABOVE **Jill Caugherty's maternal grandparents, Harold and Margene Thurston, circa 1955**

MEMORY'S SONGBOOK

a review by Anna McFadyen

Jill Caugherty. *Waltz in Swing Time*. Black Rose Writing, 2020.

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JILL CAUGHERTY's short stories have appeared in *805Lit*, *Oyster River Pages*, and *The Magazine of History and Fiction.* Her debut story, "Real People," was nominated for the 2019 PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers. The author is a graduate of Stanford University with an MS in Computer Science from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and an MBA with honors from UNC Chapel Hill. She worked for twenty-five years in the tech industry as an award-winning marketing manager and now pursues creative writing full-time in Raleigh, NC.

Jill Caugherty was inspired to write her debut novel, *Waltz in Swing Time*, by the life and letters of her maternal grandparents. In this testimony to the power of music, ninety-year-old Irene Stallings remembers her career as a pianist, singer, and dancer during the Great Depression. Chapters alternate between Irene's vibrant youth and her troubles in old age – a temporal dance that prevents readers from losing sight of her core identity, regardless of her external deterioration. Throughout this book, Caugherty explores one of the most overlooked but important forms of social invisibility today: the devaluation of the elderly. With frankness, she examines seniors' loss of agency and visibility amid physical decline, as well as their plight of loneliness.

Irene rebels against these issues by secretly recording her memoir on a handheld device. Unfortunately, assisted-living personnel think she is "talking to [her]self," a senile behavior to medicate (23). Their misunderstanding epitomizes assumptions that younger people make about Irene. Her reactions against agism remind me of "Gynecology," a poem from Kay Bosgraaf's *The Fence Lesson* (2019), which I previously reviewed for *NCLR*. The poem's narrator refuses to discontinue her pap smear screenings in her seventies, protesting, "How dare [the doctor] tell me I am not / viable? I will have my exams."* Irene similarly wants her life to matter – to be seen as more than old. She declares, "[R]esistance . . . is all I have left," as she fights to remain herself. She does not wish to be drugged into docility, thinking, "Even if I'm sad, my emotions are real, not out of a bottle" (26–27). However, as Irene begins to make "wrong turns" in confusion, she admits, "I can't help feeling that something essential is slipping away from me, ever so gradually, not unlike the eating away of a sandstone cliff in a canyon from years of harsh winds and water, until the cliff's definition collapses, and its composite gravel and clay have washed down the mountain" (51). Her (appropriate) metaphor recalls the terrain of her youth in Utah.

Irene's recordings narrate her escape from farm life into the exciting world of entertainment, set during the era of jazz clubs and Fred-and-Ginger musicals. Songs like "Someone to Watch Over Me" and big band hits play across the pages, evoking the glamor of the time. These elements shine between shadows cast by the Depression, and yet Caugherty paints the desperation of this period carefully.

When Irene's Mormon parents sell their piano to survive, their daughter's artistic soul starves, but her dreams persist. Irene's musical talent becomes her ticket away from hardship and rural conventions. A summer entertainment job at Zion National Park provides the professional opportunity she craves, but Irene's chances are jeopardized when she falls for a seasoned dancer at the camp. Her electric scenes with Spike bring *Dirty Dancing* to mind, as the young couple escapes the Depression through the thrill of performing together. Their courtship unfolds among the natural wonders of the canyons, where CCC boys build trails for Roosevelt's economic relief program. For a time, this young pair escapes the Depression in the thrill of performing together.

Lines from Irene and Spike's favorite song foreshadow the protagonist's twilight years: "Someday, when I'm awfully low . . . I will feel a glow just thinking of you, and the way you look tonight" (238). She will depend on memories of love to make her final trials endurable, finding company in the backward glow of her musical history. As Irene copes with discouragement, Caugherty emphasizes the power of music therapy for the elderly. Music is a lifeforce to Irene, imparting inner freedom and solace.

More than any other grievance of her changing lifestyle, Irene resents being treated like a child in old age. The swapping of mother-daughter power roles is difficult for her to accept, as her daughter becomes the parent figure. Irene feels angry when Deirdre and the doctors talk past her head during appointments, making decisions as if she were not present. She knows her daughter "means well," but Irene has fought for independence her entire life, and she does not surrender the habit easily (27). Caugherty's novel explores this and other frictions between mothers and daughters across four generations. Although Irene disagrees with Dierdre, she tries not to repeat her own mother's mistakes that prevented healing between them.

When Irene first moves to an assisted-living community, her cynical humor brands the Golden Manor the "Golden Manacles," despite its elegant dining room, movie nights, bridge parties, beauty parlor, budding geriatric romances, and bevies of stylish white-haired ladies (6). She admits, "The forced jollity of the Manor sometimes makes me want to scream. I never chose to spend my final days in a Disney Land for seniors" (76). To her amazement, other residents behave like they are not approaching the end, and they do not resist being coaxed into a second childhood. Irene scoffs that staff members "don't dare publicly acknowledge the other possibility, that we are entering a horror . . . a steady downward spiral" (199). Instead, they throw parties with "cake . . . ice cream, birthday hats . . . balloons, even a few . . . favors for the guests," especially for "residents whose families may have forgotten them completely. That is to say, whose relatives have abandoned them here, signed away checks, and, like the three monkeys, closed their eyes and ears to any bad news from inside these walls." Irene observes that residents are eventually "pushed around the garden in wheelchairs that might as well be adult-strollers," and she is aware of their "spoon feedings and diaper changings" (198–99). In her view, the Manor is an anteroom to death, with a nursing wing waiting conveniently around the corner.

The Manor's carnival atmosphere cannot distract her fellow residents from every reality, however. When Irene's friends visit her in her final stage of care, they "inch ever so slightly away, and gaze out the open door into the hallway," uncomfortable in the knowledge that "once people arrive in the nursing wing, they don't come out alive" (274). As they leave, Irene says, "I have the sensation that I've just seen someone very dear off at the train station," but it is her own self that slips away: "I fill with the quiet, inescapable knowledge that the person who has left will not return" (275). She must make peace with her departure.

Caugherty knows assisted-living culture well, including its routines, ironies, and forged alliances. Her observations ring true in my own experience: for a decade, I spent hours every week visiting my grandmother in an elegant assisted-living community like Irene's. And like this protagonist, my grandmother was always a young person trapped inside an old person's body, with the fight to enjoy life still surging in her, even though doctors, blinded by her age, overlooked her potential to contribute further to society. At 101, she had not given up on achieving a fuller lifespan. Fortunately, she had advocates in my parents, who helped her pass the century mark, but too many elderly people do not have defenders against ageism, even in high-end facilities. This novel illustrates how a balance of care and listening must be achieved to preserve a person's individuality – and it acknowledges that the longings of the elderly are no less important than those of the young.

These topics are seldom addressed at length in fiction with an insider's perspective, and few novels open with a nonagenarian narrator. I applaud Caugherty for addressing the emotional and intellectual value of the elderly without dismissing or diminishing them in the process. She draws attention to a deserving subject. ■

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* Kay Bosgraaf, *The Fence Lesson: Poems* (Kelsay, 2019) 71.