

SECRETS AND FRIENDSHIP

a review by Megan Smith

Heather Bell Adams. *The Good Luck Stone: A Novel*. Haywire Books, 2020.

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HEATHER BELL ADAMS's writing has won the Rose Post Creative Nonfiction Award, the Carrie McCray Literary Award, and the James Still Fiction Prize, and has appeared in, among other literary magazines, *Still*, *The Thomas Wolfe Review*, *Atticus Review*, *Broad River Review*, and *Pembroke Magazine*. A lifelong North Carolinian, she works as a lawyer in Raleigh and serves as the 2022 Piedmont Laureate. Read her story, "The Virgin of Guadalupe's Moon," the winner of the 2021 Doris Betts Fiction Prize, in the 2022 print issue.

While Hendersonville, NC, native Heather Bell Adams set her debut novel, *Maranatha Road* (2017; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019), in contemporary Appalachia, she alternates the setting of *The Good Luck Stone* between World War II in the Pacific and modern Georgia and North Carolina. The novel also alternates between two female perspectives, exploring the lasting impact that decisions can have and the power of friendship throughout life's trials.

Adams opens the book with an introduction to Audrey, the ninety-year-old matriarch of the prominent Thorpe family in Savannah, GA. At an event exhibiting Filipino artifacts, Audrey remembers her time as a nurse during World War II, which prompts a journey to face the decisions she made during the war. While Audrey struggles to conceal the secret about her leaving the war – a secret that could cause dire consequences for her family – she is also trying to prove to her concerned granddaughter, Deanna, that she is capable of caring for herself, despite her worsening health. Deanna convinces Audrey to hire a caretaker. In Laurel, an unemployed mother struggling to find the means to pay for her son's education, Audrey finds a confidant for her secret and an ally in her fight for independence.

Throughout the novel, Adams provides glimpses of Audrey's life during World War II as she unfolds the story behind the secret that Audrey has hidden from everyone she loves. During the war, Audrey met Penny and Kat, and the three young nurses formed a bond that impacted the rest of their lives. Shortly after

they met, Penny bought matching jade brooches for the three of them, a sign of the friendship shared by "[t]he unbreakable three" (57). At this point, the island the three nurses were assigned to seemed far from the war, and the young women, still the carefree women they were before their war experiences, initially enjoyed their hours away from the hospital by sunbathing on the beautiful beaches of Manila Bay and dancing with American soldiers.

Once the three nurses volunteered at Fort Stotsenburg, however, they witnessed the horrors of war as they were thrown into harrowing circumstances. While traveling with wounded soldiers, Audrey had to "[k]eep everyone calm and together" during a bomb raid threat (116), despite her own fear. And eventually, when the women were stationed on Corregidor, the island was captured by Japanese soldiers.

For a reason Audrey had to keep secret from those around her, their commander allowed her to escape. Her decision to leave threatened the bond she had with her friends, but she was too ashamed to admit the circumstances for decades to follow, until confronted with the possibility that her secret could cause an irreparable rift between herself and her granddaughter.

In modern Savannah, while under Laurel's care, Audrey receives a letter from a woman who recognized her at the art exhibit because of a brooch she wore. Terrified that this woman would reveal her secret, Audrey travels to Wilmington to stop her. Knowing that Audrey's abrupt decision to leave town



PHOTOGRAPH BY U.S. ARMY

without informing her granddaughter may result in Deanna's decision to take away Audrey's independence completely, Laurel follows Audrey to help her.

The journey to find Audrey also helps Laurel face her own trials. Laurel and her husband are struggling with their relationship after years of trying to have a second child. When Laurel starts working for Audrey, she believes that her husband has "given up. Not only on another baby, which would have been bad enough, but on her too" (273). Laurel's adventure with Audrey gives her time to think about her relationship with her husband, and once she returns home, she gains the strength to talk to him about the goals each has for their life together. Through caring for Audrey, Laurel regains a sense of purpose. Like Audrey, she recognizes the importance of caring for one's family. After seeing that Audrey's life has taken a different, but fulfilling, path than

the one she planned for herself, Laurel realizes that her own path in life was not "what she'd imagined," but "she'd somehow ended up in this abundant and sustaining place" (274).

Audrey's life during the war also sheds light on historical events often neglected by providing an insightful and emotional look into the lives of nurses during World War II. Throughout her life, Audrey often wondered about what happened to her fellow nurses. After the war, she spent her life "collect[ing] newspaper interviews with nurses who were captured by the Japanese on Corregidor," interviews in which former captives "described the claustrophobia, the pitiful rations, the constant bomb raid sirens" they had faced; yet throughout their captivity, the women "kept serving as nurses, caring for the wounded and sick internees" (223–24). Indeed, in an "Author's Note" at the end of the novel, Adams provides

resources for more information about the nurses captured at Bataan and Corregidor. Often referred to as the "angels of Bataan and Corregidor," these nurses from the American Army and Navy continued to care for the wounded throughout their captivity, and all seventy-seven nurses were rescued after spending almost three years in captivity. The nurses hardly received any recognition following this event, but many modestly claimed "that they didn't do anything extraordinary, they were just doing their jobs."*

While it is not uncommon for war narratives to detail the bonds that soldiers form with each other, in her novel, Adams illustrates the bonds that nurses form during war and the dangers they face, providing a rare perspective on World War II. And throughout *The Good Luck Stone*, Adams illustrates the importance of friendship and the sacrifices that people make for those they love.

By offering different perspectives throughout the novel, Adams also examines the complexities of aging and the difficulties that people and their loved ones face as they age. Her characterization of Audrey depicts a strong woman who, while aware of her declining health, is unwilling to give up the independence that she has worked for throughout her life. And as Adams takes the reader on the journey of Audrey's life, she illustrates the ways that friendships can transcend time and space and persist throughout generations. ■

ABOVE a group of the Angels of Bataan and Corregidor in Manila after their rescue from the Santo Tomas Internment Camp, 1945

* Kim Guise, "Nurse POWs: Angels of Bataan and Corregidor," *The National WWII Museum* May 2021: [web](http://www.nationalwwiimuseum.org).