

THE COMING OF WISDOM IN WWII EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

a review by Donna A. Gessell

Leah Weiss. *All the Little Hopes: A Novel*. Sourcebooks Landmark, 2021.

DONNA A. GESSELL is Professor Emerita of English at the University of North Georgia in Dahlonega. She holds two BA degrees from Ohio State University and an MA and PhD from Case Western Reserve University. She has published on such writers as Flannery O'Connor, Gabriel García Márquez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Lorraine López, and Graham Greene. She is also the co-editor of *Graham Greene Studies*. She reviews regularly for *NCLR*.

LEAH WEISS was born in eastern North Carolina; at age ten she moved to the foothills of Virginia. Retired from a career as Executive Assistant to the Headmaster at Virginia Episcopal School, she now resides in Lynchburg, VA, and writes full time. Her first short stories, published in *The Simple Life* magazine, *Every Day Fiction*, and *Deep South Magazine*, are set in her birthplace, which is also her mother's family's home and the setting for *All the Little Hopes*. Her debut novel, *If the Creek Don't Rise* (Sourcebooks Landmark, 2017), received strong praise for its depiction of its North Carolina location, a small mountain community.



Rife with seemingly trivial facts, *All the Little Hopes* by Leah Weiss imparts great wisdom as the two focal characters come of age during the three years the novel recounts. Lucy Brown and Bert Tucker, thirteen-year-olds in 1943, will have experienced events beyond their years by the end of World War II (and the novel) in 1945. Their experiences transform a typical coming-of-age novel into one that exhibits the coming of not just knowledge but wisdom, revealing the novel's power to develop universal themes, deepening its significance for readers.

At first, the outside world's effects seem visible only in the form of Bert's relocation across North Carolina from her remote mountain family life to that of an agricultural-centered flatland community. Her spatial relocation becomes a philosophical one. She at first clings to her limited worldview, according

to which her move is a fated punishment for actions that have contradicted her Appalachian upbringing. Her need for concrete reassurance over symbolic ones is evident in the small objects she pilfers and keeps as amulets. Embracing Lucy's world, Bert learns to trust herself as capable, allowing self-determination in complex relationships, including friendship and love, and in war. Learning to read and learning to love reading allow her to embrace the symbolic and appreciate the transformational qualities of a good story read well.

The friends experience relationships of all kinds across complex societal divides. Because readers learn the social norms through the two protagonists, in chapters that alternate first-person narration between the two young women, we become aware of how experience is colored by belief

systems. Readers are guided through the nuances of society that color ethical decision making. On her first bus ride, Bert experiences "Coloreds in back behind the white line" (34), and Lucy is mesmerized by Trula Freed, whom she describes as a "voodoo goddess with unknown ancestry. A gypsy queen everybody reveres or fears" (25).

Lucy finds that the etiquette lessons her mother requires only prescribe behavior in general terms, as she and Bert must modulate their behavior to be appropriate for interactions of all kinds, from dealing with a neighborly half-witted man who helps them in large ways, to accepting beauty makeovers from wealthy debutantes who visit from New York and practice haute couture. The makeovers so remove Lucy and Bert from their everyday experience that they become almost unrecognizable.

Lucy's reading of Nancy Drew books furthers her thinking abilities, enabling her to evalu-

ate facts in ways that cause her to glean the knowledge necessary to solve mysteries, not only those featured in fiction but also those that occur in her life. For instance, with Bert's help collecting evidence, she creates the case of her "very own *Mystery of the Missing Man*" when a local man disappears (91). Additionally, reading books focused on the popular female detective subconsciously provides her an empowering worldview, one featuring a commanding role model with two equally, but differently abled, strong friends who all skillfully negotiate varied social settings, equipped to solve problems for themselves, and for others.

Although the novel is mainly set on a tobacco farm that also keeps bees for honey and wax, a wider reality impinges on daily living because of the war. The young women are all too aware of the sacrifices made by the fighting-age men from their area, including an older



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brother and a brother-in-law. They see a shift in values as their honey and beeswax production becomes a crucial wartime effort. When German prisoners of war are brought to their farm to increase its production and supply labor that their fighting men cannot now provide, the girls encounter the Nazi enemy firsthand, learning to negotiate good and evil, despite recognizing the ambiguity involved.

The young women witness differing kinds of love, some firsthand, ranging from that of Lucy's parents and family, to those that are inadequate, including the love of the naive, the lust of a one-night stand, the negation of love through abuse, the inadequacy of hero-worship, and the loss of a loved one. As a result, the friends learn from the full range of responses that result from the many forms of love: insanity, illness, sorrow, despair, loss of community standing, recognition of ambiguity, acceptance, joy, and fulfillment. Ultimately, the love they experience transcends the individual and becomes embedded in the community as the



Americans – young and old – learn to respect the Germans for what makes each one individual, with values that they share.

The wider implications of the narrators' interactions with their community, which lead to wisdom and then to truths, keep the book from being a simple coming-of-age story, easily assigned to the Young Adult category. The intensity of the war's influence on the community members' daily lives has magnified the process, and the revelations elevate the applicability of the life lessons imparted to become important for readers of any age or stage of awareness. What makes the sophistication of the two narrators' thinking even more strikingly apparent is their trip to Bert's mountain home for her father's funeral. Both friends

at once appreciate and evaluate the differences in culture, values, family rituals, and expectations. They both realize that Bert's newly-won self makes it impossible for her to live her previously held dreams without a great sacrifice. Her older self is now symbolized only through the concrete objects she has stolen. In recognition of her new identity, as the two young women return to their lives in eastern North Carolina, Bert sheds her talismans while confessing her former weaknesses, becoming even more assured in her choices. *All the Little Hopes* deftly reveals the universal truths that the two young friends have negotiated, particularly that love overcomes all. The young women have come to ask the question "where is the truth

about right and wrong in all this morality grown-ups preach?" (313). By leaving room for further investigation, the lessons learned fulfill readers.

Perhaps, though, the novel becomes even more satisfying for mystery readers. True to the skills of Lucy's sleuthing heroine, Nancy Drew, Lucy solves the mysterious disappearances, grown to three over the course of the novel. She does so through her newly-found understanding of the nuances of love and human nature. In true sleuthing style, she creates knowledge from seemingly meaningless and unrelated facts noticed in her own small community in rural eastern North Carolina, to build knowledge that in turn reveals greater universal truths. ■

2022 NC AAUW YOUNG PEOPLE'S LITERATURE AWARD



Micki Bare received the 2022 North Carolina AAUW Young People's Literature Award for *Society of the Sentinella*, a book for middle-grade readers, published by Level Elevate, an imprint of Level Best Books in Maryland. At the center of *Society of the Sentinella* is Zahra, described on the publisher's website as "a sprite-like tween no bigger than a loblolly pinecone." Set in the Birkhead Wilderness of the Uwharrie Mountains in central North Carolina, *Society of the Sentinella* is the first of five novels Bare has planned for her Zahra of the Uwharries series. Bare is also the author of the Thurston T. Turtle series of children's books published by Skippy Creek.

Though Bare grew up in the mountains of New Jersey, her family moved to Raleigh when she was a teenager, and she earned a BA in Speech Communication at NC State University. She is a contributing author and assisting editor for the anthology *Writers Crushing COVID-19* (LightSpeed, 2020). She has been a teacher and, for almost twenty years, a columnist for *The Courier-Tribune*. She has also been published in *Thrive Magazine*, *Piedmont Parent*, and *Our State*. Bare currently lives with her husband in Asheboro, NC. ■