

MAKING SENSE OF THE SIXTIES

a review by Sheryl Cornett

Lee Zacharias. *What a Wonderful World This Could Be*. Madville Publishing, 2021.

SHERYL CORNETT was a longtime member of the faculty at NC State University but now writes full time from her homes in North Carolina and south Louisiana. Her poems, stories, critical essays, and creative nonfiction appear in numerous publications including *NCLR*, *Image*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Mars Hill Review*, and *The Independent Weekly*. She holds degrees from Miami University of Ohio, UNC Chapel Hill, and Seattle Pacific University.

LEE ZACHARIAS is Professor Emerita of English at UNC Greensboro. She served as editor for *The Greensboro Review* for ten years. Her works include a short story collection, *Helping Muriel Make It Through* (Louisiana State University Press, 1975), and four novels, including *Lessons* (Houghton Mifflin, 1981), *At Random* (Fugitive Poets Press, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014), and *Across the Great Lake* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2018 reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2020). Both *Lessons* and *Across the Great Lakes* received the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for fiction. Her other publications include essays in *NCLR* 2004 and 2008.

In *What a Wonderful World This Could Be* by Lee Zacharias, we meet a colorful cast of midwestern college students, professors, and activists. We first see these players when the novel opens in 1982 (which reads as “present day” timeline in the present tense) and then, in dual timeline shifts from 1960 to 1971.

The first half of the 1960s presented in Zacharias’s novel seems optimistic in some ways as Alex lives a teenage life of unparented freedom. She comes of age more fully in the less innocent but exhilarating, dangerous, chaotic second half of the 1960s. Alex, an only child of a single parent, is the heroine, protagonist, and person most dramatically transformed in *What a Wonderful World This Could Be*. This is her story against the backdrop of a world in tumultuous transition.

The novel opens in the “present” with Alex’s radical husband, Ted Neal, turning himself in to the FBI after eleven years in hiding for leftist “crimes” committed during the 1960s. On TV news coverage, he is shot by an angry crazed bystander, left in critical condition, then a coma. The storyline then jumps back to 1960 when Alex is fifteen years old.

Alex’s journey from there to the novel’s end unfolds with compassion and page-turning interest: she raises herself to the cusp of young adulthood, though technically she lives with her neglectful absentee professor-artist-mother until the summer before her junior year of high school when she moves in with her professor-boyfriend of two years, Stephen Kendrick, “Steve” to his friends and colleagues, “Kendrick” to Alex. She is beginning that relationship

when we meet her fifteen-year-old self in 1960.

Not yet a photographer (Alex’s eventual profession), in the early days of the novel, she has a lens on the world, infused by her sharp, intelligent mind. Her perspective is that of the unloved child whose spirit is both distrusting and hungry for romance, family love, and a nourishing, stable home life. But most especially she needs love. Her natural desire for these basic human needs is bone deep and drives her journey from 1960 to 1982. Before she knows herself well enough to understand her essentially orphaned self’s longing and confusion, she falls in love with photographer Kendrick, who actually does nurture and support Alex, giving her the much-needed domestic stability and intimacy: “It was romantic, she told herself, just like in *Romeo and Juliet* . . . she was happy. The restlessness that had twitched inside her limbs and soured her voice was gone” (137).

Of course, the Kendrick affair is illegal, Alex being fifteen. But Alex’s mother tacitly approves of her daughter’s cohabitation with him. As Kendrick puts it halfway through the novel, “The truth is – and I wouldn’t say it if you didn’t know – your mother was relieved when I took you off her hands” (166–67). So it is that Alex becomes a “happy hausfrau. At the supermarket she filled her cart with Windex, Comet, and Mr. Clean. She read *The Joy of Cooking* . . . refined their yard sale furniture, and stitched Indian bedspreads into pillows and drapes” (184). In short, she’s creating with Kendrick the home she never had. Perhaps she’s even beginning to



mother herself, while Kendrick shepherds her into adulthood, including educating her as a photographer. Kendrick encourages her “to finish high school. . . I’m going to make sure you study and do it right” (167). Alex graduates, and the pair move to New York City. Unsurprisingly, Alex must continue growing up by separating from her mother, but also from Kendrick.

Fast forward to the mid-1960s, and “movements” of all kinds are on fire. Enter Ted Neal, whom Alex meets while living with Kendrick in New York. A handsome and charismatic leader of the emerging American Radical Left, Ted lures Alex away from her stability with Kendrick into the “family” of a collective, and his interests become her own. In fact, Alex all but gives up on furthering her photography during her years supporting Ted’s causes and the two of them working minimum wage jobs.

A subtle exposé on the mentality of the time, Ted’s likeable but suspicious character self-describes his upbringing as “Rich [white boy] . . . I went to prep school and learned how to light farts” (43). He had dropped out of Wallace University, where Alex

grew up as faculty offspring, and once they become a couple they return to Limestone, a college town, so that Ted can embed himself in the university system as a returning student and bring to it all he learned from doing civil rights work during the Mississippi summer of 1964. Ted comes across as someone who can play the radical – vision or no vision – because he can afford to. He likely knows he’s coming into a trust fund.

The core of *What a Wonderful Life This Could Be* is humanity’s need for the safe harbor and connection of love – for community and purposeful vocation and for some form of family, even if not biological. This poignant topic is rendered through Alex’s journey to a more fully developed self with a purpose and vocation and, by the novel’s end, a strong sense of what she wants in life.

By 1982, Alex can see the truth that one friend tried to tell her back in the day: “Ted couldn’t exist without disciples – he has to be the hero . . . he loves the way you follow him around with the camera” (228).

And true to his nature, Ted abandons Alex (in more ways

than one) when he goes into hiding in 1971. With that event she also loses another “family,” that of the collective. She waits faithfully for Ted for eleven years, using the time to get advanced degrees and a college teaching job, but when she learns he will not recover from the shooting, “for the first time in years she [begins] to feel as if she has a future” (183). By 1982, Alex wishes “she could tell [Ted] . . . what she knows now . . . [that] rare courage is [not] a thing you could bless yourself with” and “how ordinary and therefore more precious is the courage it takes to go on living in a world you discover you haven’t been granted the power to change” (293).

Some readers may find that the core of *the novel’s* sweeping story is its setting in the most turbulent decade of the twentieth century that included the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the New Left, Student Demonstrations and Protests, and anti-establishment venom dressed in “gaudy youth cult” (111). Revolution-in-the-making disguised as “community organizing” shows up in the novel’s packed narrative; topics

of women’s rights, abortion, and divorce laws make cameo appearances. Add to these plot elements, the paranoia, censorship, police brutality, political polarization, activist bombings, distrust of the Federal Government, and changing sexual ethics, and one comes away from the photographic eye of this visceral, visual novel wondering if that much has changed since the 1960s.

One problematic issue with this novel is Zacharias’s curi-

ous choice, within the dual timeline, to toggle the 1960s chapters forward and backward in time. For the first four chapters, the reader alternates between 1982 and 1960. Suddenly in Chapters Five and Six, we jump to 1964–65. Chapter Seven happens in 1982. Chapter Eight jumps back to 1960. The reader has to work hard to keep up with the timeline. This narrative and structural craft choice may suggest the inner tumult and confusion experienced in

the 1960s that Alex is still sorting out as an accomplished adult in 1982. *What a Wonderful World This Could Be* can indeed be heavy reading, but I believe the novel’s testimony and vivid rendering of history, both a nation’s and one woman’s, is worth readers’ efforts. *What a Wonderful World This Could Be* deserves close reading and “remembering” – by those who were and were not present to that defining decade in history. ■

VALERIE NIEMAN RECEIVES SIR WALTER RALEIGH AWARD

Asked about her recent honor, Valerie Nieman responded, “I am stunned and absolutely delighted that *In the Lonely Backwater* was selected for the Sir Walter Raleigh Award. A deeply personal work, this novel was many years in the making. I had inspiration from many sources including Sir Walter Raleigh honoree Fred Chappell, friends, fellow writers, and my editors at Regal House wouldn’t let the book – or me – rest until it was ready. I hope it speaks to the complicated, brave, vulnerable, mutable individuals we all are.”

The Sir Walter Raleigh Award is given by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association and the Historical Book Club of North Carolina for the best work of fiction published each year. Nieman’s Raleigh Award novel, published in 2022 by Regal House Publishing in Raleigh, is her fifth novel. She is also the author of three collections of poetry and a collection of short stories.

Originally from New York state, Nieman moved to West Virginia and then North Carolina, where she worked as a journalist and professor. In 2000, she became a professor at NC A&T to teach Journalism and work with the newspaper before she began teaching creative writing in the English Department. She has received multiple awards such as the Greg Grummer, Nazim Hikmet, and Byron Herbert Reece poetry prizes. Nieman was also a North Carolina Arts Council poetry fellow (2013–2014) and received an NEA creative writing fellowship. According to Susan O’Dell Underwood, who reviewed Nieman’s novel for *NCLR Online Fall 2022*, *In the Lonely Backwater* is “a compelling work of fiction for any reader who loves a good mystery.” ■

