

A PORT OF DESPAIR

a review by Jon Kesler

Michael Keenan Gutierrez.
The Swill. Leapfrog Press,
2022.

JON KESLER is an organization development consultant, retired Air Force Officer, and aspiring author working on his first novel, based loosely on the letters his father wrote to his mother during World War II.

MICHAEL KEENAN GUTIERREZ is the author of *The Trench Angel* (Leapfrog Press, 2015; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017). Originally from Los Angeles, he earned degrees from UCLA, the University of Massachusetts, and the University of New Hampshire and has been teaching at UNC Chapel Hill since 2012. His short work has been published in *Cobalt*, *805 + Art*, *The Delmarva Review*, *The Collagist*, *Scarab*, *The Pisgah Review*, *Untoward*, *The Boiler*, and *Crossborder*. His screenplay, *The Granite State*, was a finalist at the Austin Film Festival, and he has received fellowships from the University of Houston and the New York Public Library.

Set in the fictional Port Kydd, USA, circa 1929, Michael Keenan Gutierrez's novel *The Swill* captures the gritty feel of a place and point in time that seems based on New York and is also reflective of any port city up and down the eastern seaboard, be it Baltimore, Philadelphia, or Boston, or any of the smaller ports across the Great Lakes such as Cleveland, Chicago, and Duluth. Although the post-World War I Port Kydd had its share of aloof, well-to-do citizens in fine neighborhoods, *The Swill* is primarily set in Port Kydd's underbelly, the Bonny, a downtrodden neighborhood that is the home of last resort for those born into it and the unlucky who wandered in and could not find their way out again.

Gutierrez's protagonist, Joshua Rivers, is the proprietor of *The Swill*, a below ground speakeasy in the heart of the Bonny that has been the life bread of the Rivers family for decades. Joshua pours the alcohol, prepares the food, sweeps the floor, and counts the too few dollars in the cash register from the not quite enough customers daily, in his futile attempt to provide for his pregnant wife Lily, whose beauty and refinement, coupled with her passion for photography, do not fit the mold of a Bonny barkeep's wife.

Haunted by his experiences in Europe during the first World War, Joshua frequently reflects on the acts he committed and tries hard to forget,



COURTESY OF FLYLEAF BOOKS

keeping his distinguished service medals stowed away: "A purple heart. A silver star. A victory medal. They were in a box somewhere in the attic. He'd sent them home after the War and forgotten all about them" (181). Throughout the book, Joshua seems to wish he could place his war-time memories in the same box and forget about them, too.

In his descriptions of Joshua's feelings about dragging his memories of the war along into his future, Gutierrez captures the essence of a soldier afflicted with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – or shell shock in the vernacular of the day – when the only available medication was alcohol and the only source of therapy came from the silent compassion of one's drinking buddies. (The PTSD is so well woven into Joshua's character that it made this reader wonder whether the author has lived or witnessed at close hand the experience of combat's lingering aftereffects.)

The story unfolds around Joshua as he becomes the reluctant, yet cooperative accomplice to his unscrupulous half-sister Olive, born of the same mother

with a different father. Through his participation in another of Olive's many misdeeds, the long-standing contentious relationship among Joshua's family, the Smyths of Port Kydd's upper crust, and the Vanderhocks, a multi-generational family of religious zealots, is brought to light. The rich, powerful Smythes and the Vanderhocks with their nefarious balance of righteousness and disingenuousness are everything the Rivers are not. Indeed, those two extremes represent all the things that hold down the Rivers and people of their lot. Through this tangled web of relationships, Gutierrez artfully blurs the lines between the virtuous and the villainous.

As a society, we are unfortunately becoming increasingly aware of the reality contained within the common observation that history is written by the victors. In this case, the history spoken of dates back to the 1870s, touching upon the class and racial tensions of that era. In short flashback chapters that wing the reader back to 1873, Gutierrez gives us a glimpse into but never a clear picture of the Bonny's most notable night of social unrest through the eyes of the current day Vanderhocks's, Smythes's, and Rivers's grandparents, who were integral to the day's unrest, none of whom spoke the truth of that day, but one of whom knew that truth and with a few brush strokes documented the cataclysmic spark that ignited the night of terror.

She turned to the sailor cropping the boy and the sailor felt her stare,

their eyes meeting, before his mouth twisted into a frightening grin, like a man possessed, and half his skull fell away, his brains seeping down his shoulder to the street, before he dropped. A stray bullet had fallen back to Earth.

"Oh my god," she said.

The little Black boy stood above him, stunned.

...

And then Nellie turned away.

That's how she remembered it.

That's the story she told for the next fifty years.

She turned away and saw nothing thereafter. The moment petrified.

The story that followed erased from her private history.

She went to her stool and sat before her canvas. She had the image in her head, knew the *truth*. (82–83)

Returning to Joshua's era, the picture painted by Nellie, Joshua, and Olive's grandmother, planted the seed for their not so legitimate after-hours visit to the city library. In an ongoing quest for money and power, Joshua's nemesis, Jasper Symthe, draws Olive into an insurance fraud and historical cover-up scheme that she quickly flips into a double cross on Symthe and just as quickly disappears, leaving Joshua to gallantly try to protect his sister, shelter his wife, and cover his own ass, while continuing to plot his family's escape to California, which predictably never happens.

Gutierrez's character development, coupled with his in-depth depictions of place and what at times are quite essential graphic depictions of violence, draw the reader in and leave one cheering for Joshua as his co-dwellers in the Bonny rally around him. ■