
It was Newton who said: ‘If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants’. Something similar could be said by many of the authors who are inspired by writers who have gone before them. Valerie Volk, in her verse novel, may not have seen further than Chaucer, but she has seen him from a different angle and that makes for an interesting and evocative narrative. In doing so, she draws on the richness of Chaucer’s characters and the charm of their stories. But by putting her verse novel into a modern context, she has allowed herself a greater freedom to explore the thoughts and motivation of the pilgrims in a way that will resonate with contemporary readers.

Volk’s pilgrims are not riding to Canterbury, but travelling in a bus to Oberammergau, Germany, for the Passion play that has been staged there every ten years since 1634. Their journey takes four days, which matches the time span in *Canterbury Tales* – and the characters portrayed by Volk match those in Chaucer’s poem. In case the reader is not familiar with Chaucer, the contents page lists the characters in *Passion Play* against those in Chaucer, and each section is prefaced by a verse from Chaucer. I wondered if this was necessary, as the characters do stand complete in their own right, but undoubtedly part of the interest of the novel is its reference to the medieval poet. One feature not found in Chaucer is the character of Caroline, a journalist who has joined the pilgrimage in search of a good story for her magazine, while using the time away from her married lover to assess their relationship. Caroline moves the narrative along while allowing us to see the pilgrims through another’s eyes. In the same way, the reader is allowed access to the thoughts of the pilgrims, a privilege not allowed Caroline, nor one allowed by Chaucer.

The Prologue explains the way the tradition of the play came into being with a confession by the man who brought the plague to Oberammergau in 1633, by returning to his wife and family from the village where he had been working in a village where the plague was rampant. The Passion play and the villagers’ promise to repeat it every ten years was their way to placate God and end the plague. The man who had brought the infection to the village found no relief:

I must accept the truth, the truth I have denied
I knew full well what I was doing
When I came back.
It was my choice to come.
The guilt is mine. (11)

The narrative then moves to the twenty-first century, as we meet Caroline, who sets off rather reluctantly to undertake the journey as an journalistic assignment. As the story progresses, we see her changed both by the stories she is hearing from the pilgrims and also by her own reaction to the Passion play, and the story that it enacts. Few of the pilgrims are motivated by religious fervour, but all are in some way affected by what they see. All have a story to tell, and Caroline makes it her business to ferret out these stories.

It is impossible in this review to outline all the characters but The Wife of Bath, or her alter ego, will give a glimpse:

Yes, marriage can become a habit, just like any other. And, after all,
If anyone should know this,
 Surely I’m the one. Four husbands down the track –

Another poised there on the starting blocks –
You must agree that I am qualified
To talk about the state of wedded bliss. (111)

Some readers may feel a little reluctant to begin a verse novel, thinking of it as a very long and difficult poem. Reading *Passion Play* will dispel that myth. The text moves comfortably and smoothly, falling into place with a natural rhythm. Volk has also succeeded in capturing the voice of each pilgrim with striking individuality. Consider, for example, Josef the Plowman, describing how he had to shoot his animals in a time of drought:

Fair broke her heart – and mine –
That morning I went out and shot the lot
No choice. They were half dead of thirst in any case.
And scrawny. No fodder. (202)

Stephen, the Scholar, regards his fellow pilgrims with contempt, while trying to repress his own guilt that he had used another scientist’s work:

But now it haunts me.
I am a thief who shrugs his shoulders,
Justifies his acts, but can no longer
See his mirrored face without recoil. (99)

The bus taking the pilgrims to Oberammergau transports a diverse group of pilgrims, just as did Chaucer’s cavalcade to Canterbury. We come to know their stories and we learn how the play itself affects each in a different way. Some find a type of redemption; others come to face themselves more honestly. None is the same person as the one who had set out four days before. Caroline has the last word:

I am indeed a part
Of all those I have met,
and must learn who I am.

Endings are beginnings.
So while I cannot see what lies ahead,
My journey too must end
As I return from Oberammergau. (324)

Emily Sutherland