

FICTION BOOK REVIEW

The Daughters of Mars

Thomas Keneally. London, UK: Sceptre, 2013.
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Pages: 528 (paperback)

The Daughters of Mars is set in the First World War, but is not so much about the war as the effect it has on those caught up in it. It is about sibling relationships and rivalry, friendship, and ordinary folk living in utterly extraordinary times.

Sally and Naomi Durance are both nurses. They grow up in small-town Australia, but Naomi escapes to a wider world, leaving Sally nursing their stoical mother through a painful death from advanced and untreated cervical cancer. In our UK practice of prevention and early intervention, this is a bald account of the disease, and yet reminded me that without those developments, we in the devel-

oped world would not have triumphed over this erosive disease. From the start Sally is an engaging character, full of self-doubt. Naomi is more distant, and one takes time to warm to her.

Both volunteer to join the Australian forces as nurses, and are sent to Gallipoli. After their feelings of helplessness in the face of the pain suffered by their mother in their personal tragedy, they have to face a new scale of helplessness as the wounded start to pour in, dealing with injuries that all of the medical staff struggle to comprehend.

They are moved to the Western Front and their stories diverge but their relationship develops and we see them settle into a determined endurance in the face of overwhelming human distress, both in the wounded soldiers they minister to and the emotional strain on all concerned.

This story is simply told, the style detached, uncluttered by speech marks. Conversation is direct, like the Durance

sisters themselves. But the emotion is beautifully drawn and keenly felt by the reader. These characters are believable and likeable. On first reading, I was disappointed by the ending, where one possible outcome is superseded by the real ending. On second reading, I felt the confusion engendered by this was intentional, reflecting the storyline, and I forgave the author!

This novel was rated highly by three generations in my family, from teenager to octogenarian. That makes it a good book in my opinion.

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