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TITLE INFORMATION

AUSTIN IN THE GREAT WAR

A Nebraska Farm Boy in the 12th Balloon Company

Robert Eugene Johnson

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BOOK REVIEW

The carnage of World War I scars an American doughboy in this debut historical novel, based on the author's father.

Johnson deploys exhaustive historical research—along with invented dialogue, composite characters, and dramatically imagined scenes—to flesh out his father Austin's experiences fighting with the U.S. Army in France in 1918. Austin is assigned to a unit that mans large hydrogen balloons—tethered to the ground—that float high in the air, reconnoitering enemy movements and correcting the aim of artillery. While that might sound like a safe, even frolicsome, way to fight a war, it is anything but. High winds toss the pilots in the baskets, who feel “like thistledown in a hurricane” after landing; German planes and artillery relentlessly attack them; and any stray bullet can turn an explosive balloon into a miniature *Hindenburg* disaster. Aside from one nauseating trip aloft, Austin works with the ground crew, but that still exposes him to shelling, gas attacks, and, on one occasion, a rain of flaming rubber after a balloon explodes. But quieter interludes are more harrowing as his outfit passes through French villages demolished by years of war and populated by stray animals, or through an old battlefield turned by shell craters into a biblical “abomination of desolation,” sterile moonscapes from one horizon to another. Worst of all is Austin's temporary reassignment to a “Sanitary” unit tasked with identifying and bagging the dead after combat, which takes him into a “Death Valley,” where American and German corpses lie in heaps.

Through Austin's story, Johnson presents an immersive re-creation of life and death on the Western Front, especially among the seldom-sung balloon squadrons. (The author includes many photographs and long historical notes; the latter, while interesting, are inserted in the main text and tend to break up the narrative flow.) He grounds the absorbing novel in realistic detail: camp routine and soldiers' equipment; mud and fleas; the procedural of balloon maneuvering and maintenance; the exact sound a gas shell makes when it bursts, alerting men to scramble for their gas masks. But in Austin's narration, the tale is also a spiritual odyssey. Beneath his seemingly stolid Nebraska farmer's exterior, he's an observant, sensitive soul shaken by the violence he encounters. He notes the shellshocked psychiatric cases among his comrades, and feels ever more shadowed by the mayhem, unable to brush it off as the fortunes of war. He prays for a dead German, refuses an order to run his truck over a live mule, and becomes increasingly haunted by nightmares. Johnson's prose is straightforward and naturalistic, but through Austin's laconic prairie twang, he conveys deeper emotional impacts, from the grotesqueness of death (“He was strung up across” the barbed wire, “twisted, face sideways....His left arm was broke and slung backwards to the ground strange, like he was trying to grab something from it”) to a mother's muted anxiety over a draft notice (“She put her arms around me and hugged me tight with her head sideways against my chest”). The result is both richly textured and moving.

A fine evocation of the face of war and the hidden wounds it leaves.

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