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Love and War

All's not fair (nor foul) in these three books

HOMECOMING, fiction by Bernhard Schlink, trans. by Michael Henry Heim. Pantheon, 2008. Hardcover, \$24.

HALF OF A YELLOW SUN, fiction by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Anchor Books, 2007. Paperback, \$14.95.

LIPSTICK AND DIPSTICK'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS, nonfiction by Gina Daggett and Kathy Belge. Alyson Books, 2008. Paperback, \$16.95.

So first, war: A force that gives us meaning? An opportunity for liars to make off with spoils? A testing ground for a strong system of law?

And what about the remains of a genocidal war? That's what German author Bernhard Schlink (*The Reader*) deals in his new book, *Homecoming*, which enters into the mine-laden territory of grappling with what's left when your entire country witnessed and perhaps created unspeakable atrocities.

Protagonist Peter Debauer grows up knowing that his Swiss father died during WWII, but he spends summers with his grandparents in Switzerland. Then he lives a curiously passive life. He doesn't know how to bring anything to fruition, from his dissertation to his relationships. As he grows older, he begins to find clues about his father and the man's obsession with Homer's *Odyssey*.

Peter tries to find an overarching theory that will help him make sense of his life, but like so many after the war, he's also leery of grand ideas. The central mystery propels the book through layers of discovery and through many versions of history. Those who enjoy Haruki Murakami's novels but find his narrators disconnected may prefer the slightly more decisive Peter, who wrestles with questions of identity and the nature of evil. If he yearns to give up and live a comfortable bourgeois life, how different is he from many others in the aftermath of a horrifying cataclysm? And yet, readers are reminded many times that Odysseus didn't simply return home to rest and enjoy his remaining years; what does that mean for Peter? Schlink reads from *Homecoming* at 7:30 pm Wednesday, Jan. 23, at Powell's on Burnside in Portland.

Ambiguity and complexity also pervade Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's remarkable *Half of a Yellow Sun* (published in hardback in 2006), which recounts the years of the Biafran War of Independence. The refrain of a Denise Levertov poem I read in my teen

years was *Biafra. Biafra. Biafra*. But I had no idea about the conflict that tore Nigeria apart in the late 1960s, no clue that the British magnified ethnic tensions dramatically before Nigeria's independence so that the struggle for a free Igbo state called Biafra seemed almost inevitable. Hm. Foreigners invade, exploit ethnic tensions, leave, watch their powder keg explode and don't intervene to stop suffering because of oil — sound familiar? Yep. But Adichie's compelling book provides far more than a parallel to today's news.

Half's three main characters — the beautiful, wealthy Olanna; her partner's houseboy, Ugwu; and the British man, Richard, who loves Olanna's sister — drive a normal middle-class novel, at least early on. Hints of grief to come surround the tale without intruding, and when violence begins, it's a surprise to characters and readers alike. Though this is a story of love for family, independence and hope, the ravages of war mark every page. "There are some things that are so unforgivable that they make other things easily forgivable," one sibling tells another. Still, Adichie doesn't deny the importance of human emotions, and that balance with the tale of war creates a powerful portrait of people striving and failing to make the world a better place — and then going on anyway.

And so to love — or, as Gina Daggett and Kathy Belge, two Portland columnists for *Curve*, write about it, a surprisingly traditional version of finding a cute woman, working on the relationship and keeping the partner. *Lipstick and Dipstick's Essential Guide* irks and fascinates alike. The quizzes? Annoying. Advice about finances and planning? Helpful. Then there's world view. I've got nothing against lesbians who call each other "ladies" (well, it *is* creepy and P.E.-teacher-like), but a touch more openness wouldn't harm Lipstick, who's eerily conventional — "Women are like swans; we're very monogamous." Dipstick offers more thoughtful advice, happily.

It's nice to have an advice book beyond JoAnn Loulan's *Lesbian Sex* on the shelf even if Lip & Dip seem to be all about the white picket fence and happily ever after. They're amusing, refreshingly no-nonsense about being dykes and local to boot, so snag the book already, sisters. Daggett and Belge talk about *Essential Guide* at 7:30 pm Tuesday, Jan. 22, at Powell's on Burnside in Portland. **EW**

BOOK NOTES: Nathan McCall reads from *Them*, 7:30 pm 1/18, Powell's on Burnside, Portland. Lisa Schroeder reads from *I Heart You, You Haunt Me*, 1 pm 1/19, Powell's, Beaverton. Jack Hart speaks, 7 pm 1/19, Newport Visual Arts Center. \$5. William Stafford **Birthday Celebration**, 2 pm 1/20, Tsunami Books. Nobel Peace Prize recipient Mohammed Yunus discusses *Creating a World Without Poverty*, 4 pm 1/20, Bagdad Theater, Portland. \$26 (includes copy of the book). Rafe Esquith discusses *Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire*, 7 pm 1/23, Powell's, Beaverton. Kirby Larson reads from *Hattie Big Sky*, 7 pm 1/24, Powell's, Beaverton. Robert Leleux reads from *The Memoirs of a Beautiful Boy*, 7:30 pm 1/24, Powell's on Burnside, Portland. Patricia Marx reads from *Him Her Him Again the End of Him*, 7:30 pm 1/24, Powell's on Hawthorne, Portland. Oregon Book Awards finalists and winners Alison Clement, Shannon Riggs, Paul Merchant and Ben Saunders read, 6:30 pm 1/24, Eugene Public Library.