

Life at a conservative college during the hippy era

In the haze of memory, the 1960s have been pegged as the era of hippies, free love and peace symbols. But that's a convenient oversimplification of a complicated time. The aforementioned were tie-dyed talismans of resistance to an establishment that still held the majority in its constrictive thrall.

In his debut novel, "Gazing at the Distant Lights," Woodinville, Washington author Doug Margeson tells a story about those people.

The time is 1964 and the setting is a conservative evangelical college in Seattle. The characters are students who haven't yet asserted independence from their parents and college administrators who exercise their in loco parentis responsibilities by

adhering rigidly to convention.

While Margeson introduces a wide cast of characters, the narrative focuses most closely on freshman Tom Brewer. A tall fellow with a reserved manner, Brewer attends this school instead of the local state university because his parents insisted upon it. Nevertheless, underneath Tom's phlegmatic surface is an indefinable longing for something

different, more exciting, better.

When he unexpectedly comes into a modest inheritance in fall quarter of his freshman year, Tom is given the ability to assert his autonomy. While his choices are limited by his imagination and upbringing, his decisions do have an impact on how he comprehends and acts upon his campus environment.

At the same time, another student experiences a negative reversal of fortune. Marilyn Pennell has only begun to settle into her first year at college when she learns that her father is heading into bankruptcy, so she spends her time looking for a compatible part-time job as well as keeping up with classwork.

The story takes place over the span of one school year, and although Tom and Marilyn interact a few times at the beginning of that year, the author chooses to examine two widely different experiences of student life by keeping them apart.

Margeson also provides jaundiced sketches of the actions and thought processes of a handful of school administrators. He pokes mercilessly at what he sees as hypocrisies inherent in trying to run an evangelical college in the middle of a decade of tumultuous social change.

As one savvy senior informs Tom, "We're all supposed to be bright Little Mary Sunshines skipping around campus, adoring our professors, worshipping our administrators, cheerfully dedicating ourselves to Christian service – and all that hogwash."

This Week's Book

"Gazing at the Distant Lights" By Doug Margeson

W & B Book Publishers — 442 pp — \$17.99

If the author's voice is cynical, it is also deeply authentic. In precise detail, Margeson captures the things that consumed college students in that particular era: the intellectual awakening, the romantic/sexual fumbling and the tentative overtures of what might develop into lifetime friendships.

Though there is one interesting absence — the Vietnam War is scarcely mentioned.

Margeson also describes a stark divide that existed between parents and their offspring at that time — 1964, after all, was the year that gave rise to the expression, "Don't trust anyone over 30."

This novel pries into, as the author calls it, "the mental recesses of the old young."

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com

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