

The Keepers of Truth
Michael Collins, 2001
Scribner, 320 pgs

Review by David Eaton Mauk

This special novel was deservedly a finalist for the 2000 Booker Prize, Great Britain's most prestigious literary award (won by Margaret Atwood for *The Blind Assassin*). The USA debut of Irishman, ultra-marathon runner, and free-lance software engineer, Michael Collins, a distant relative of the famous Irish freedom-fighter of the same name, was a sensation in Europe before being released this fall in the United States.

The book is a keen observation and commentary on the unseemly side of the American Dream as seen through the lives of a community in decline. Three story-lines run in parallel with one another: a mysterious murder of the despised father of the town bad-boy; a chronicle of a community's decay after losing its prime industry; and daily business at *The Truth*, the town's paper, which is for sale.

The book's narrator, who the reader knows simply as Bill, is a marginal reporter who is cynical and intellectually pretentious. He's the illegitimate scion of suicide father, whose family's closed, rusting factory is the symbol of the town's debilitation. Bill inhabits the family mansion where he leads a lonely, alcohol-inspired life dealing with the truths of his own family secrets when not working on newspaper assignments. He is a pathetic though sympathetic character, as his philosophical diatribes reveal other truths that emerge from the ashes of industrial misfortune.

There are many colorful characters springing from the pages of the novel, like in the small towns Collins represents in this unnamed place located in America's rust belt. There's Darlene, a beautician whose insight into people's desires and repertoire of intimate customer knowledge provides a unique opportunity to fulfill the dreams of those women who seek transformation in her salon.

Sam is Bill's boss, editor and publisher of the newspaper that he's trying to sell instead of close down. He has a knack for making over-burnt tuna melts, which he offers in celebration and commiseration, to his two-man staff. The paper's photographer Ed, is the husband of the beautician, and spreads the crumbling fate of the town in pictures across the tabloid. Obsession is rooted in each of the character's activities, and overcomes the town, too, as it displays itself in following coverage of the murder investigation.

The reader confronts the murder early on, as a dismembered finger is discovered through what starts as a missing person investigation. More body parts show up later as police mark the son, Ronnie Lawton, as the only suspect, which turns the thug into a local celebrity. Bill becomes entangled through infatuation with Teri, the beautiful, trailer-dwelling, waitress, estranged wife of the prime suspect, further adding tension to the story.

Collins powerfully confronts the stark truth of how the American Dream can tarnish as lives and communities struggle in the devastating wake of economic transition. It's not until the closing pages that each plot-point reaches startling, yet largely satisfying conclusions. The reader is given a unique, almost voyeuristic view of a cultural tragedy playing out in our nation's landscape. It is brought to life with compassionate understanding through the human dimension depicted by carefully drawn characters and insightful writing.

Don't be surprised if *The Keepers of Truth* is one of best books you read this year. It is bound to be among the most memorable.