Silenced Battles
Author:
Nieves Muñoz

READER'S NAME: Kenneth Barger

Las batallas silenciadas by Nieves Muñoz is a novel set in Belgium and France during World War I. It follows the adventures and misadventures of women toiling in different fields and places on the front lines. An embattled head nurse tries to keep her ramshackle field hospital running in the face of incompetent commanding officers and failing supply lines. A forlorn prostitute leaves Paris to set up shop in a brothel near the front so she can be closer to her soldier lover. An idealistic English nurse's assistant wonders if volunteering for the war effort was a huge mistake. And a determined budding physicist butts heads with the recalcitrant doctors she was sent to train on the use of the new X-ray technology. As each woman looks for her place in the crazy, deadly world of trench warfare, their paths cross in unexpected ways.

Written in impeccable Spanish with a dose of lyricism, *Las batallas silenciadas* draws the reader in with excellent pacing. Most of the chapters start with a letter written by one character to another, lending structure and rhythm to the story. Foreshadowing and cliffhangers are used just enough, but not too much, keeping the reader engrossed and eager to see what will happen next. And it is well-researched: medical terminology, war and military language, and the occasional French word or phrase all ring true.

The protagonists of *Las batallas silenciadas* are multidimensional. As the story progresses, more and more facets of their character are revealed, and their experiences in the war change them. As the characters evolve, so does the reader's relationship with them. The head nurse, who at first seems mean and harsh, shows her vulnerable, anxious side. The self-doubting, naïve young VAD discovers unsuspected resilience within herself. The self-sufficient prostitute reveals the pain and trauma that haunt her.

This novel offers a hard look at the horrors of war. It does not shy away from the ugliness of trench warfare, catastrophic injuries, infectious diseases, madness, trauma, and death. And unlike many war novels, even some purportedly anti-war ones, it never glorifies violence. And yet it is not always grim. Even against such a bleak backdrop, friendship, love, and laughter are parts of the story.

This is a fresh and important perspective on the war, examining it through the eyes of women main characters. Each of them, in one form or another, faces condescension and derision from the men she comes into contact with in the male-dominated context of early twentieth-century wartime. Each grapples with this in her own way, with differing results.

Many novels have been written about World War I. *Las batallas silenciadas* provides a new and important gaze at a horrific conflagration and the varying roles of women in the conflict. Its crisp prose and compelling structure keep the reader engaged. And its complex characters captivate the

reader little by little. A novel with universal appeal, *Las batallas silenciadas* is a stimulating, entertaining, thought-provoking, and worthwhile read