

WINNIPEG FREE PRESS, Sunday, August 28th, 2005  
Reviewed by Helen Sigurdson

### Cycle of Smoke and Fire Affecting

This affecting literary novel is set in a tobacco growing region of southern Ontario during the 1950s. It tells the story of an adolescent boy who is disfigured by a terrible fire. It is also about the healing effects of storytelling by the doctor who cares for him.

Elizabeth Ruth is a Toronto writer whose debut novel, *Ten Good Seconds of Silence* (2001), was a finalist in three Canadian book awards. Her style in both novels is rich with compelling metaphors and subtle implications, but with *Smoke* Ruth seems to have honed her skills and written a better novel.

The story begins with a graphic scene of a young boy being jolted awake as he is engulfed by flames after a night of drinking and smoking. The local doctor who treats Buster's burns tells him stories to distract him from his physical and emotional pain. The doctor has fled from his family's involvement with organized crime in Detroit. He relates tales of Prohibition, gangsters with guns, rum runners, secret passages and roll-away shelves. Buster is fascinated. It becomes obvious that Doc John's stories are as therapeutic for him as they are for the boy. They become best friends.

In the town, life is monopolized by the tobacco farms that surround it. Everyone smokes. Prominent tobacco farmers compete to lead the Tobacco Growers Association and girls vie for the honour of being Tobacco Queen. The authentic portrayal of life on a tobacco farm is not only interesting but enlightening. It certainly opens our eyes to different social mores at a time before cigarette smoking became public enemy No. 1. The story is divided into the cycles of the tobacco growing season with astute comparison to the cycles of a person's full lifetime.

Ruth evokes small-town life in the '50s with descriptions of marshmallow Jell-O salads, cashmere sweater sets, listening to the Platters' *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, dancing to the music of Guy Lombardo at the Paradise and cruising in vintage cars. It is in this setting that the scarred Buster comes of age and that Doc John struggles with his past. As close friends, they help each other in surprising ways. The dynamics of Buster's family change immediately after the accident. Buster struggles with his future and no longer sees taking over the farm as an option. Guilt, anger and frustration flare up. At the same time Doc John's life changes as the stories he tells to Buster become too realistic.

Ruth emphasizes her dominant theme, that "a person is not necessarily what you see or think you see," as different characters come to grips with who they really are. It is in conveying the emotions involved with this realization that Ruth does her best writing. The doctor tells Buster, "only a fool or the dead don't change." Although her subject is serious, Ruth lightens her tone with charming figures of speech, such as "even the fish were in danger of drowning" and "a whispering sunrise was getting ready to shout." The clever hints of deep, dark secrets and surprising sexual identities and deviations are so

subtle that some of the revelations at the end come as a shock. The cycle of smoke and fire comes full circle.

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