



Poplar Hill
By Stephen Ramey Glines
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Review by Dennis Daly

Living well demands a nobility of style, opportunity, ability and daring. Dying well demands a good sense of self, stoicism, and a lot of luck. Very few mortals, unfortunately, achieve both estimable objectives. Stephen Ramey Glines, in his first novel, *Poplar Hill*, chronicles the life of one rather eccentric woman named Kitty Stevenson, who, with finesse and karma to spare,

attains each of these aspirations.

Kitty, the scion of a once prosperous New York society family fallen on hard times, exudes a sense of royalty and command. She is one of those characters who centers herself in any context and watches with wry satisfaction as the world adjusts. Pictou County in rural Nova Scotia provides the setting for most of these adjustments.

Glines' quasi-fictional (Kitty was a real person) account of this singular woman divides into two tracks: her end-of-life adventures in Pictou County, and her stories of personal exploits in the "cabaret atmosphere" of pre-war Nazi Germany. This counterpoint technique adds wonderful depth to both the emotional and historic sides of the building chronical.

Right off the bat Glines draws the reader in with the unconventional celebration of his protagonist's wake, orchestrated and managed by that same protagonist, the very much alive Kitty Stevenson. He accomplishes this effectively in a seductive Prologue. Kitty's celebration of her upcoming passing is suitably covered by Canadian TV and catered by the local Oddfellows Retirement Home. Appropriately, the cooks from the retirement home are students of Kitty, who, it turns out, is one of only six master chefs in all of Canada.

Among the end-of-life scenes constructed by Glines, the January ice storm, which opens the book proper stands out with memorable authenticity and gut-wrenching detail. Here is a comical section of that scene, which mixes in marvelous local flavor with anxiety, in between power outages and shortly after Kitty's heart attack,

...To Kitty's surprise, she heard a dial tone. As she was about to dial Earl's phone number, she heard the pounding, thud, thud, thud, on her back door.

"Hello Missy," roared the voice. It was Earl, crashing through the door.

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"Hello yourself. Barb got a hold of you I see."

"Oh yes Missy, she said you were feeling poorly, and that I should check on you. Are you all right? It's still icing out, must be an inch or three all over everything; probably lost most of me orchard. The roads are bad enough, and me truck's in the ditch so I can't take you no place but I see you have plenty of food. That's good. I bought you some milk, Missy. I'll put it right here. You shouldn't open the refrigerator when the power is out ya know. The lights should be back on in a bit. It's cold in here. It's a pity you sold off that Beautiful wood stove. How much did you sell her for, Missy? Would you like your quilt?"

In the country everyone knows a character like Earl.

Glines, following his protagonist's physical decline, switches back and forth onto his second narrative track, Kitty's resurrected memories of pathos, danger, and murder. During the late 1930s she studied opera in Munich Germany. Her family still had some money but it was tied up in German investments and those German marks could not be exported. Kitty's job was to spend the money in intellectually stimulating Munich and freewheeling Berlin. Every teenager's dream... except for the looming catastrophe of Adolph Hitler and the Nazis.

Timing is everything and much of the story's tension revolves around Kitty and her expat American friends as they plot their eventual escape before war breaks out. Leaving Germany at that time often involved complicated machinations beyond the scope of the American Consulate—especially after the devastation of Kristallnacht. It doesn't help that Kitty and her crowd frequent Café Heck, a hangout that also accommodates the likes of Hitler and Hermann Goering.

Glines' technique often contrasts the utter seriousness of those dark times with youth's lightheartedness and recklessness. Here Kitty describes the group's amateurish, but well-meant preparation to photograph a concentration camp,

...We rode out from the 'English Garden' single file with Joe leading the way; I was right behind him with Sam behind me. Kozie brought up the rear. The plan was to ride out to the Dachau camp then ride by on the access road while I photographed it with the camera Joe had given me. If there was any trouble, I was to toss the camera over my shoulder and keep riding if possible...

... the pack was supposed to

split into four groups, each pedaling down a different road.

Unexpected success sometimes rewards recklessness and Glines' narrative takes that plausible turn.

Kitty's growth as a woman and her growing horror at Nazi atrocities, Glines ties to the plight of a Jewish bookseller and his family unable to

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get out, but still trying to survive the insanity. They are personal friends of Kitty. Add to the plot's intrigue an SS officer, who has infiltrated their group of friends and the stage is set, inexorably, for violence.

In the book's denouement Kitty finishes her hitherto untold story with flourish, then, showing off a bit of classical knowledge, comments on Plato's description of Socrates' leg numbness as he died. She now notices the same phenomenon in herself. Having bequeathed her body to science, Kitty fades quickly. She dies. The book ends. But the usefulness of this well-lived life, fictional or not, continues.