

Acts of Love and War by Maggie Brookes

Maggie Brookes, Acts of Love and War (Century, hardback)

In turbulent times and modern moments of turmoil, our connection with the past becomes even more sensitive, even sharper. Maggie Brookes' new novel, Acts of Love and War, follows a young girl volunteering with the Quakers to feed starving refugees in Spain in 1936 – and the parallels with contemporary news are sadly easy to find.

Lucy is our protagonist – a straightforward, forthright young woman who cannot rest until she helps others. Her problem is that she is in love with two brothers, who are also both involved in the Spanish civil war in different ways. Tom, a boyish, perhaps rather rash character, leaves to fight for the Spanish Republic at age 19; his quieter, perhaps rather pompous older brother Jamie leaves to report for the Catholic Herald shortly after. It is their actions that prompts Lucy's own, yet unlike the brothers she goes in peace to help the refugee children in Spain, her own hopes of helping by training to be a doctor having been thwarted by her father.

But peace is a finite state, and the trouble within Spain is somewhat of a mirror for the trouble in Lucy's heart as she struggles to understand her feelings for Jamie and Tom. It is a love story, and yet the backdrop is one of war, and the brothers, too, become symbols of war throughout the novel, both refusing to understand each other's perspectives. Lucy's attempts to unite them are tempestuous, but her work with the Quakers is honest, heartfelt and solid. Even as the novel moves towards 1939, where the reader is aware of what may happen next, Lucy's actions do change some of the harsh, morbid conditions in which many have been forced to live. There is some hope in the tempest, and real hope, too, as many of these details are based in truth.

And this is the ultimate power of Brookes' fiction: that is, how closely woven it is into fact. We know what is about to happen on the world stage, and yet it is impossible not to feel moved when children are reunited to families, or children can play without fear; Brookes' careful details also reveal some of the minutiae of the difficulties in helping others when many organisations are involved. The research into every detail, from the offices themselves, the garments the staff wore, and what the volunteers fed the children, mean that the world we live in throughout the novel comes into sharp, and often uncomfortable focus. The images of starving people in filthy, bombed out streets are hard to look away from, and yet they are images that seem horribly familiar. But despite some of the more desperate images we see, Brookes also affords us a little hope. That is something, too, that we can take from the past.

*Holly Howitt is a writer of poetry, fiction, non-fiction and academic pieces. Her most recent publication is a collection of poetry, The Hall.*