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Taut and lean and elegant

REVIEWED BY LYNDA GRACE PHILIPPSSEN

The Globe and Mail

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Underground, by June Hutton, Cormorant, 246 pages, \$21

The day June Hutton's debut novel, *Underground*, arrived, even though it was quite late I took a quick peek at the first page before heading up to bed.

A third of the way through, I had to force myself to put it down.

Once finished, I returned to it in idle moments, not to begin the review but to read for pleasure; let the pages fall open, pick a sentence, a paragraph or a chapter to savour. It's that kind of story.

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To find illumination in the darkness that shapes his life, it is necessary to "step to the side," something that protagonist Al Fraser learns. To survive, it is essential to trust past experience, squelch his fears and persist.

At times, luck sticks a hand in it too. It's also Hutton's luck to have had a grandfather who "was buried alive in a trench at the Somme. He dug his way to the top and punched a fist through the mud." That incident, coupled with Hutton's discovery that the international soldiers' salute during the Spanish Civil War was a raised fist, sparked this story.

The novel opens after a night spent digging out a collapsed trench in the Somme. Fraser, not yet 18, and "another dozen of them up and down the trench, their helmets just skimming the top, a line of turtles along a ditch hoping their shells protect them," wait for the end of their tour. However, in the "oyster smear" of daylight on their return to the dugout, "the cold air becomes an oven, hot breath roars in his ears. A heavy hand clamps onto his skull and flings him up into folds of hot air. ...

"The brown sky balloons and then collapses, hurtling him back to the ground ... into the same brown dirt that has

lifted him and now, instantly, buries him."

This is not Fraser's first journey underground. At 14, so short that the other miners said he should work with the Chinese in cramped tunnels where "workers had to crawl on their bellies," he went into the Nanaimo coal mines "two thousand feet below the ocean floor." Before that, his first Canadian home was a soddie where his mother's Spode and Persian carpets "looked as silly" as they did later in a miner's shack and on an abandoned ranch.

Nor will it be his last. Full of shrapnel, Fraser journeys from the trenches to recover in England, where he was born, and home to Princeton, B.C., once he is strong enough to travel. Eventually, he finds work as a ceiling painter in the upscale homes of Shaughnessy in 1920s Vancouver, but his high perch on scaffolding doesn't always shield him from memories. Through willpower, he resists, "his reasoning fouled by odours and creeping thoughts" which threaten to pull him into the abyss of his own mind.

After the crash of 1929, his life becomes one of soup kitchens, flop houses, hobo camps and, eventually, a work gang pressed into breaking ground for the Hope Princeton Highway at 20 cents a day. The Union of Relief Camp Workers' strike takes him back to Vancouver. There, an encounter with a cop turns brutal, but Al is rescued by Henry, a Canadian of Chinese descent who guides him to safety via "a tunnel leading into a tunnel leading into another tunnel ... all of it brown, then black," below Pender Street.

When it is safe to move, Fraser heads for Whitehorse, acquires a new identity and eventually enlists in the Spanish Civil War. "He will die here. It strikes him at once. This is why he has come to Spain, this is how he will make up for the past." But this is not his fate. "They hadn't marched to a final and glorious battle but squirmed and sweated along roads choked with mules and refugees and lunatics - a seething mass that in the end was their funeral procession." Though "Al accepts his fate ... he does everything in his limited power to delay it."

The extended metaphor of burial and other leitmotifs that weave through the book - Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro*; the pinks, mauves and lavenders that conjure up a normal life full of "childhood certainty"; the pieces of shrapnel that work their way out of Fraser's body over the years; the Chinese dragon dance; even Vancouver's eternal rain - don't become stale or feel contrived in Hutton's hands. Rather, they are emblematic and beautiful.

Hutton's prose is taut and lean, elegant and poetic, reminding me at times of Annie Proulx. Some seven years in the making, *Underground* is well plotted, its overall development generally free of the missteps, digressions and flab sometimes found in first novels. Its exploration of a man's creative defiance and ability to embrace his own imperfect life plumbs the intrinsic qualities of art, poetry, human geography, chance and love.

Metro Vancouver's Lynda Grace Philippsen is a contributor to A Verse Map of Vancouver and Half in the Sun: Anthology of Mennonite Writing.

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