



The Skylarks? War

Books Reviewed:

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Reviewer:

[Rebecca Butler](#) [3]

~~Not a choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Peter and Clarissa Penrose, the latter known as Clarry, are brother and sister in a narrative set before, during and immediately after the First World War. The children's mother died when Clarry was three days old. The children have been raised by their father, who is physically present but mentally absent. Peter and Clarry are regularly left in the care of various servants, as well as a kindly elderly lady named Mrs Vane.

Their greatest joy comes in the summer holidays, when they travel to Cornwall to stay with their paternal grandparents. They roam free in the Cornish countryside with very little supervision. In contrast, Peter is so determined to avoid going to a boarding school that he jumps from a moving train, which leaves him with one leg permanently shorter than the other. When Peter does go to school, he meets and befriends Simon Bonnington.

McKay is of course already well known to young readers as the author of the **Casson family** series. This book maintains the quality that her admirers have come to expect of a McKay novel. Her book is distinguished by the honesty with which it depicts Peter's impairment after his leap from the train. McKay does not fall into the trap that many others fall into, the trap of the unexplained miraculous cure. Nor does Peter respond to his disability with unflinching cheerfulness. He feels left out and resentful, as in truth one would. McKay depicts with great effect a binding friendship developed between Clarry and Simon's strong-willed sister Vanessa.

At Clarry's grammar school she comes in contact with a teacher named Miss Fairfax. Despite the convention of the times, that young women were expected to entertain only the most limited educational aspirations, Fairfax encourages Clarry against the odds to aim at Oxford and to take a tutorial job in the meantime.

Many writers whose narratives are set in this First World War period concentrate their attention on the details of warfare. McKay concentrates her attention on her characters and the lives they lead in the darkest of days.

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