

New Review by James Mathews: All Quiet in The Deadenig



Can you hear that? The oppressive quiet of an autumn morning as the lull of artillery settles like fog across the pitted landscape that was once Western France. The quiet came on a Monday, November 11, over one hundred and seven years ago. Yet it was a silence that would ultimately betray the men who returned home, alive but disfigured and broken from the grim horror of trench warfare, a horror so brilliantly portrayed in Erich Marie Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the seminal novel of life – and death – on the frontlines of the Great War (the very concept of a “World War One” would not enter the global lexicon for another two decades).

Although Remarque's sympathetic protagonist, Paul Baumer, never came home in the wake of the book title's tragically ironic communique, the author, a veteran of the war himself, nevertheless attempted to build on the international acclaim and success of his war novel by highlighting the plight of the survivors. Hence, his subsequent novel, *The Road Back*, focused on veterans in the post-war reintegration era. While commercially successful, the result was rather disappointing as a work of literature, especially when compared to his earlier, career-defining masterpiece. Remarque's raw and stunted narrative style suited *All Quiet* to perfection. In *The Road Back*, the approach only served to highlight the need for more emotional depth.

Such literary drawbacks are notably absent in Jim Beane's debut novel, *The Deadenig*, which features the return from war-torn Europe of American soldier Harrell Hickman. Like so many young veterans during this time, the euphoria of victory parades came and went in an instant. Now, shot through with

laudanum and whiskey, Hickman flees the Baltimore hospital where he was being "treated" for the grossly misunderstood condition of "Shell Shock." Hickman wanders across the Midwest, in search of relief from the incredible trauma he witnessed and suffered, seeking not only quiet, but the quiet of *peace*. And while the veteran carries no physical wounds, the torment and waking nightmares he endures only intensify the longer he is without drugs and the ever elusive solitude.

Through most of the early chapters, Hickman stumbles into the role of a vagabond with a haunted past, riding the rails and encountering other veterans in similar straits – and more black market laudanum. Throughout, he displays the classic signs of what is today known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Temperamental and fatigued, a constant posture of threat assessment permeates his every move. And although violence seems inevitable in nearly all of Hickman's encounters, he manages to avoid (or stall) such outcomes by hastily retreating. No job is permanent for Hickman, no handout beneath him (or his resentment), no livery stable too filthy for a fitful night's sleep.

Along the way, Hickman offers glimpses of his experiences in France, despite his efforts to suppress the memories. And it is this reflection that is crucial to his development as a sympathetic, but doomed character. And nowhere is it as stark as when his wandering takes him into Nebraska and the town of Wisdom where he is befriended by a fellow veteran, Willem Redd, a shopkeeper who also happens to be the town's sheriff. Redd lost an arm and an eye in the war, but nonetheless leads a productive life and has seemingly reintegrated into society. With work as scarce there as the other nameless towns Hickman rolled through or avoided, he manages to land a job mending fences for a local rancher named Conover. But there will be no lasting comfort in the work. Despite the vast prairie stretching to the horizon in every direction, it's clear that Hickman is at the end of the line.

Ruthlessly mocked by fellow ranch hands, in particular by the rancher's young son, Hickman once again struggles against the urge to retaliate, a fight he ultimately will lose as the drugs and whiskey ebb. His grip on sanity weakens to the point where his mind becomes more unhinged and fantastical, his escape all the more twisted and illogical and ultimately impossible. This doom spiral is artfully rendered by Beane who leads the reader – and Hickman – into the inevitable violence, not only for Hickman, but even for fellow veterans like Redd whose efforts to intervene and help seem as doomed as Hickman's realization of any true sense of solitude and peace.

One striking aspect of Hickman's characterization is his unwavering seriousness. Beane manages to imbue in Hickman a sense of moral weight and age. One easily forgets that this is a *young* man, barely into his twenties, who has in essence been drained of his youthfulness and wonder. Remarque summed up these young soldiers returning from the war with the simple description "...youth no longer." Beane masterfully shows us this reality without bogging the story down with verbose or unnecessary exposition.

Beane's sparseness in the narrative delivery is most impactful when we see Hickman through Redd's eyes. Even when Hickman is right in front of him, Redd still presents the vision as if from an impenetrable distance. In one scene, Redd watches as Hickman, his reluctant guest at that point, as he

"...stoked the fire left burning in the woodstove overnight and sat beside it to chase the chill of the night spent freezing in his shack. Redd never questioned his guest; he didn't have to. He'd known doughboys like Hickman, young men who went to war to become heroes. Men like himself. Men who knew nothing of war or the deadening effect it had on one's soul. Redd knew many men like Hickman, he had been one of them."

Beane's novel is certainly worthy of comparison to *All Quiet*

on the Western Front in its straight-forward, emotive style – what some call third-person dramatic point-of-view – but also puts one in mind of Cormac McCarthy and his blend of suddenly tense dialogue set in the backdrop of Western noir. It's this quiet intensity and deepening nightmarish tone that keeps the reader clutched in the novel's grip.

The Deadening is a fast read in that it homes in on dialogue and action to provide almost all the inference a reader needs to suspend disbelief and see the narrative unfold. That said, the book is also not a *quiet* read. Rather, it takes us to that silence that we must all hear and address and answer for. And perhaps, ultimately, find the true quiet and elusive lull of peace.

Purchase Jim Beane's *The Deadening* (Mandel Vilar Press, 2024) [here](#).