

into poverty who learned to use his cunning and wits to claw his way forward from day to day. Without a family to fall back on, he survived with his mates in a city and country which cared little for him. The coming of war in 1914 changed all of this. Forced to enlist by a judge, Ben and his mates end up serving in the Western Front trenches in 1916. The endless violence of World War I trench fighting transforms Ben's life as he is accidentally treated as an officer after being wounded.

The same engagement which sends him to hospital kills all of his friends. Realizing that his acting as an officer will inevitably result in severe punishment, Ben stows away on a steamship bound for America. The British Army deserter adapts to New York City by again calling on the quick thinking that enabled him to survive London. Ben's changing circumstances bring him in contact with an American con artist who quickly educates his eager student in new ways of making quick money.

At this point the story changes; you will find several competing scams run by highly sophisticated con artists to be as challenging as any you've ever encountered. Giving away the plot would be a crime in itself, so I will avoid that misstep in favor of warning you to bring your best game with you when you approach Nicholas Griffin's Ben and his peers. Never assume you are keeping abreast, let alone ahead, of the action. Remember, cons are called "artists" for a reason.

*John R. Vallely*

#### **THE WAR AGAINST MISS WINTER** Kathryn Miller Haines, Harper, 2007, \$13.95/ C\$17.50, pb, 318pp, 9780061139789

In 1943, even in New York City, the heart of American theatre, acting jobs are scarce, so struggling actress Rose Winter works for private detective Jim McCain to pay the rent. However, under the terms of her *Stage Door*-like boarding house, unless she gets an acting job within a week, she's out on the streets. To make matters worse, she stops receiving her salary from the detective agency when she finds Jim hanging from a noose in the office closet. Rosie doesn't believe Jim killed himself, and when one of Jim's clients asks her to continue working for him, she finds herself in the midst of a mystery that combines both of her worlds.

Aided by her roommate Jayne, a musical comedy actress, Rosie searches for an elusive lost work by playwright Raymond Fielding, while sparring with her acting rival and fellow boarding house inhabitant, Ruby Priest. Haines, an actress and playwright herself, excels at a sense of place and characterization. I shivered along with Rosie in the cold New York City of World War II and agreed with her that Jayne was the best sidekick a gal could have. Mobsters with suspiciously tender hearts, gold-digging actresses, and wealthy society dames round out the cast of characters. The mystery itself is a bit too convoluted for its own good, but Rosie is just swell. If this is the first in a series, sign me up for number two.

*Ellen Keith*

#### **SING FOR YOUR SUPPER**

Rosie Harris, Arrow, 2007, £5.99, pb, 440pp,  
9780099502975

Tudor Morgan refuses to go down the mine; his ambition is to make a name as a singer. When he and Karen and their baby Delia move to Cardiff in search of better opportunities, Karen has to find a job while Tudor cares for Delia by day and sings in clubs at night.

Tudor pretends to be an out-of-work miner (it is 1926) and busks, sending little Delia round with a hat. Karen has to cope while he is in prison, and forgives him when he returns. He has not, however, changed his ways and things get worse.

Karen's love for Tudor is all-forgiving, despite the problems he causes. She is warm, steadfast, and determined that they will all survive. From a naive young girl she matures into a strong woman, and she keeps the family together and never completely loses faith in Tudor. This saga of life in 1920s Cardiff will satisfy all Rosie Harris's fans.

*Marina Oliver*

#### **STORM OVER BURRACOMBE**

Lilian Harry, Orion, 2007, £12.99, hb, 312pp,  
9780752867229

This well-crafted, heartwarming, page-turning story is a light rustic romance, set in the Devon of 1952. Interwoven sub-plots of three or four coincident love stories cleverly weave a masterly picture of village life as women gain their rightful position in the work place. Characters are well shaped, of all ages and classes. Some use dialect in a charming way, calling females my maid, my bird or my pretty.

The storm of the title is the one which caused the Lynton and Lynmouth disaster. There are other reminiscences of 1952—rationing and shortages, John Wayne films and the army in Germany. I remember it well so I doubt coffee would have been drunk in a farmhouse kitchen.

Hilary Napier runs her father's large estate. When he brings in a manager she feels resentful. Her conflict with Travis Kellaway then pervades the book. The pantomime run by the curate and his developing love for the schoolteacher further bind the story. There is a remarkable and touching friendship between an older man and a woman who could have been his daughter. Masterly description of a poaching drama at night, which results in the sad injury to a child, who has an important part in the pantomime, adds pathos.

Sensitive and elegant writing gives excellent geographical detail of Devon towns as Lilian Harry captures the warmth and everyday drama of a village in this, the third of her Burracombe novels.

This is the third of this author's books I have been pleased to review.

*Geoffrey Harfield*

#### **THE ISLAND**

Victoria Hislop, Harper, 2007, \$14.95, pb,  
384pp, 9780061429262 / *Headline Review*,  
2006, £7.99, pb, 480pp, 0755309510

As London-born Alexis Fielding, a modern-day college graduate, explores her past, she is

drawn to visit a former Greek leper colony. This storyline, however, is merely the wrapper for the intricate tale of the Petrakis family, Alexis's ancestors. Alexis feels that understanding her aloof mother's background would help her determine the direction her own life should take. But her mother refuses to speak of her past. Instead, she encourages Alexis to contact an old friend, Fortini, who resides in Plaka, a coastal town on the island of Crete. Fortini's story reveals a history of secrecy and guilt that provides closure for Alexis's mother and a better perspective for Alexis regarding her mother's behavior.

Prior to the 1960s, those diagnosed with Hansen's Disease, commonly called leprosy, were banished to secluded colonies, often on remote islands. Until the development of a cure, which was delayed by World War II, no one with leprosy was allowed to mingle with the general population. Spinalonga, situated off the shore from Plaka, provided a home for Greece's afflicted. Alexis's great-grandfather, Georgiou, serviced the islands by boat, making deliveries and ferrying doctors, and various women from the family eventually call Spinalonga their home.

The combination of leprosy, Greece, and World War II provides a fascinating historical backdrop to a story that explores relationships and the disruptions that happen to all families to some extent. The difference is that this family's problems could not be kept closeted away, and they affected all participants in ways much less subtle than the actual disfigurements of the disease's victims.

Originally printed in the UK in 2005, this first US edition is engaging, educational, and provides ample fodder for further thoughts, making it a perfect book club choice.

*Suzanne J. Sprague*

#### **LOVING FRANK**

Nancy Horan, Ballantine, 2007, \$23.95/  
C\$29.95, pb, 362pp, 9780345494993

This debut novel explores the little-known romance between the architect Frank Lloyd Wright and the wife of one of his early clients, the pre-suffrage feminist Mamah Borthwick Cheney. Although in 1909 both are married with young children, they fall in love and eventually run away to Europe, destroying their respective families and scandalizing Chicago in the process. Although the couple eventually returns to the architect's Wisconsin homeland to begin work on one of his most revered treasures, much is lost in the process, and a heavy price remains to be paid.

Although the story is told well and apparently accurately from the viewpoint of Mamah, the novel is strangely lacking in feeling. Just why the affair occurs, and what keeps it going, remains difficult to understand. The motivations of both parties in devastating their own families seem inadequately explored, leaving one the impression that an overwhelming sexual attraction is the major, and perhaps only, cause. The author does seek to make a tortured link to the main character's incipient feminism, which as an explanation for her behavior seems tenuous