



# BiblioFiles

By Ruth Freeman

Readers' Advisor @ the Rowayton Library

## November 2008

I would call Dave Boling's novel 'Guernica' the book of the month for November. Set in this Basque town in the years leading up to the infamous 1937 fire bombing by the Germans, it is historical fiction at its best. The author has obviously done his research into the embattled Basque culture and traditions, making the characters and atmosphere very believable. There are also historical figures in the book, most notably Picasso, whose Guernica mural would document the horror of targeted civilian bombing as a weapon of war.

There are several families whose intertwined lives are the backbone of the multigenerational family saga. The Ansotegui brothers are the central characters and follow the traditional Basque vocations of fisherman, farmer, and priest. The descriptions of everything from the meals to the standard methods for fishing and shepherding are fascinating. The tension increases as the bombing date draws closer and the Spanish Civil War rages. The randomness and suddenness of the cruel bombing is described in detail, and you feel the horror of the stunned populace facing the aftermath.

Staying in Europe, 'Out Stealing Horses' by Per Petterson was originally published in Norway. It is the story of Trond Sander, a man nearing seventy who lives in isolation in Eastern Norway. The book goes back and forth between the present and the transformative summer of 1948 when he was an adolescent living with his father in the country. The writing is spare but beautiful, and he nails some wonderful descriptions of the country side such as his description of riverside logging. He has a great way with animal descriptions. I especially liked the moment when his spoiled dog, deprived of her human food by an unexpected guest, gloomily empties her bowl of dry dog food as if she were "eating from the poisoned chalice". Can't you just picture that dog's expression?

It is the mundane and tragic events of that pivotal summer that drive the plot, along with his father's work in the Norwegian resistance during WWII. In the end it is a story of loss and loneliness on many levels. It is about the discovery of the layers of those we know and don't know all at once.

For the armchair detective crowd we recommend 'A Cure for Night' by Justin Peacock, a first time author who sets his novel in the Brooklyn Public Defender's office. The dialogue is sharp and the drug bust/murder plot line has surprisingly original twists. Because he was a lawyer



# BiblioFiles

By Ruth Freeman

Readers' Advisor @ the Rowayton Library

before he was a writer Peacock understands the courthouse milieu and the strategies that can make a huge difference in the outcome of a trial. There is a cynical aspect to some of the author's views; the legal system does not always get off lightly. His observations feel authentic and lend the book a "you are there" quality that keeps you involved in the imperfect hero's path to a redemption of sorts. The question you are left to ponder is whether the price was fair and who had to pay it.

November is the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War I. We have organized an exhibit of some of the notable historical fiction based on this war. The selection ranges from the unequalled classics 'All Quiet on the Western Front' by Erich Remarque and 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' by Ernest Hemingway, to the more recent 'Losing Julia' by Jonathan Hull and 'Birdsong' by Sebastian Faulks. Even Danielle Steels's newest novel 'A Good Woman' takes place in a WWI field hospital. The tragedy of the war has also inspired mystery writers such as Charles Todd, with his haunted Inspector Ian Rutledge character, and Jacqueline Winspear's indomitable Maisie Dobbs.

The war also famously inspired a generation of poets who wrote of the harrowing experience of the trenches and the constant presence of death. The actual stench and terror of life in battle translated into some of the most poignant verses of the 20th century. We highly recommend 'The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry', an anthology of poems by combatants from all countries. Here is just one example, the first verse of a poem by John McCrae:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
between the crosses, row on row  
that mark our place; and in the sky  
the larks, still bravely singing, fly  
scarce heard among the guns below.

This collection is highly recommended and we have multiple copies on hand.

###