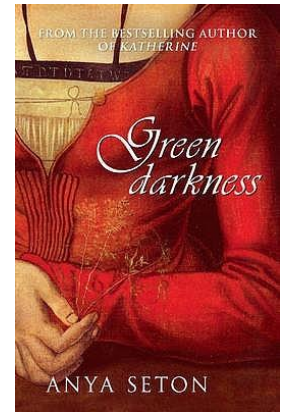


Book Review

Green Darkness by Anya Seton

This book was recommended to me because part of the action is set in Midhurst, where I live. There is also a section set in Cumbria, where I lived for thirteen years. When I bought it, I read that the author had grown up in a theosophical family, and theosophy has been an interest of mine most of life. It's also a historical novel, which I like, with links to the twentieth century. I was looking forward to reading it!



Most of the story takes place in the sixteenth century, against the backdrop of the changing fortunes of Protestants and Catholics following the death of Henry VIII, but the first 100 pages are set in the twentieth century. This section is quite badly written. The house party feels like the 1930's but is supposed to be the 1960's. The characters are exaggerated, almost caricatured. One of the difficulties for a novelist is the creation of different voices for the various characters, and Seton deals with this by giving some of them accents. Not just a hint, with the odd dialect word for good measure, but Yorkshire and Scottish accents laid on with a trowel. The dialogue and the events themselves are melodramatic. So really, not a lot going for it.

When we go back to the sixteenth century the writing is more assured, or perhaps I am less able to judge whether or not the author has captured the essence of the period. Now, however, we have heavy Cumbrian accents to contend with, and the characters are still exaggerated.

The crux of the novel is the connection between the two periods. Some of the characters in the sixteenth century have reincarnated (in accordance with basic theosophical tenets) in the twentieth century, and carry with them some of the karma created in that earlier period. Does the author carry this off? Well, once again I found it wanting. Usually, when characters occupy different centuries, the action is interspersed until the stories eventually come together in some way. Here, we get over 400 uninterrupted pages of sixteenth century, and I had difficulty remembering what had happened in the first 100 pages.

The most enjoyable parts (for me) were the imagined descriptions of everyday 16th century life at The Spread Eagle, Cowdray, St Ann's Hill, and Ightam Mote.

In the last 30 pages, once again in the twentieth century, Seton explains the connections, tying up most of the loose ends, but for me it was generally unsatisfactory. The whole point of reincarnation as understood by theosophists is that some progress is made, lessons are learned, and the incarnating soul evolves, but these modern characters are more like mirror images of their earlier selves. Rather than presenting reincarnation as hopeful and rewarding the author makes it feel more like hell, an endless repetition of past behaviours. Not for me, I'm afraid.

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