from the point of view of the older one, contributes to the discovery of meaning during the reading experience. However, relationships continue to feel superficial, and a sense of resolution is hardly reached at the end, when the children find their freedom in a much changed world, as the plot feels imposed more than originated by a flow of events that matured the protagonist.

If we accept that narrativity is based on the subject's experience of the events in the story, as representing subjective experience is the role of narrative since the modern age, the difficulty in reading *Tale of the Yugoslav Wars 4* resides in the superficiality of the treatment of character and historical context. As a work in the sphere of the science fiction alternate history genre, some additional character development would have enabled a deeper appreciation of the narrative experience and elevated this work to higher standards. Additionally, it is noticeable how the female presence is particularly underdeveloped, and remains at the level of stock characters without a meaningful contribution to the story. Therefore, one can see how this novel could be considered as part of a fast-paced, inconsequential production. An American writer of Slovenian ancestry, Andrew Anžur Clement moved to Slovenia in 2017, becoming a Slovenian citizen and making the country his home. A writer who is developing his skills, Clement will certainly produce stronger work in the future.

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Margaret Walker. *His Most Italian City*. Tucson: Penmore Press, 2019. 295 pp., $19.50 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-946409-94-2.

It is an angry young Slovene man who, on the very first page of Margaret Walker's debut novel, thrusts an incendiary bomb through the shop window of Matteo Brazzi, her Triestine main character, in April 1928. Set in the interwar years, *His Most Italian City* begins with a literal bang, drawing the reader into the narrative in a sweeping narrative that moves from Trieste to Istria and back again, punctuated both by the spirit of a whodunnit and an exploration of the effects of shifting geographical borders on Slovenes and Italians alike.

The story follows the dual narratives of Brazzi, newly relocated to Cittanova (present day Novigrad, Croatia) and Giovanni Micatovich, a longtime resident of the city. Brazzi—an ethnic Slovene once known as Matej Banich—professes allegiance to Mussolini, proudly promoting fascist tracts in his new cafe. And while Brazzi's intentions are presented as genuine, and

become a major plot point both in the present moment and in a series of flashbacks to 1920, they appear more in service of his love for coffee than for love of state. Repeatedly, characters in the novel profess that Brazzi is the type to adopt any political position that will advantage him; meanwhile, the novel begins and ends with an ode to his coffee: "Traveler, if you seek the finest coffee, disembark at Trieste…" (1) and later: "Signor Brazzi struggles to imagine a world without coffee… You may visit him if you choose, traveler, but his cafe can only be found by word of mouth…" (293). Even Teresa, the local cook he employs, admires his espresso machine as she critiques his character. And while Brazzi becomes entangled in a malevolent plot forwarded by Signor Monfalcon a former member of the Arditi, the First World War era Royal Italian Army special forces, to extort money from the Micatovich family, his cafe remains at the heart of the narrative and his character.

An amusing scene with two older Austrian women takes place in the first third of the novel which reveal the both Brazzi's true colors and the way in which the novel pokes fun at fascist ideology even as one of its main characters appears an allegiant fascist. In this scene, the Austrian women offer their compliments to the chef, the aforementioned Teresa, but the dialogue quickly shifts from pleasantries to a debate about Teresa's linguistic abilities. She must go to Italy to learn proper Italian, they insist, and laugh when Brazzi announces that Cittanova is now a part of Italy. Unable to move on from the past (as evidenced by their First World War era fashion), the two women maintain a pleasant demeanor as they leave and analyze a tract that Brazzi has posted in devotion to Italy, outlining his allegiances, which clearly state that the Dalmatian coast was once "oppressed by Austria" (65). The women declare the statement lovely but request the offending language regarding Austria be removed, which Brazzi promises to do through dialogue even as he assures the reader that he absolutely will not do so. To compound the humor, Monfalcon later calls Brazzi a fascist in name only and criticizes the declaration as weak. Across the novel, dialogue is rendered in animated and comic turns, making Brazzi a compelling character to follow even if the reader rebuffs his ideologies. And while the particular scene with the two Austrian women is not a pivotal plot point, it is representative of the amusing banter Walker presents at the best moments in the novel and illustrates how she richly populates its pages with a cast of local characters with a range of affiliations and histories.

The true intrigue of the story, however, involves Brazzi's work to escape his past in Trieste and to help find Giovanni after he mysteriously disappears one night. The novel includes a lively plot that Walker paces expertly through her chapters, revealing just enough in each one to keep the reader moving forward without spoiling its turns. The initial scenes when Giovanni is revealed to be missing, for example, are stretched across many pages: first, Walker narrates Giovanni's voyage out to sea to inspect a

lighthouse, then she shifts back to his father's narration, wherein the father realizes the next morning that his son has gone missing and proceeds to ask about his whereabouts around town, having been put on edge by his granddaughter's claim that Giovanni was devoured by a sea monster, before she finally turns back to Giovanni, who awakens in what he thinks is a coffin before realizing that he has been abducted and is now a passenger in a stolen submarine.

Walker's prose, which generally alternates between fast-paced and often amusing dialogue, and third person omniscient narration and backstory, occasionally slips into poetic reverie as she adopts a close third person form of narration, particularly from Giovanni's perspective. For example, when Giovanni thinks he is to be tossed overboard after speaking back too harshly to his captors, she writes:

> Giovanni noticed little things then: the sunbeam had come back and, in the patch of seawater on the floor, a rainbow was shining on its scum of diesel. The frosty winter air swarmed into the high narrow opening like a gale through a tunnel, sweeping out the stench and the dead rankness, filling the steel hull with hope. But he could see nothing save the ladder leading up to the world he had loved and felt only a terrible sadness at leaving it. He shut his eyes. Somewhere very close were his parents, frantically wondering what had become of him. Close were the green hills, the parks of oak and pine, the fishermen sorting their catch, the blue waters of the bay, the grand and overarching sky. (93)

Such moments of narration slow the pace of the narration in a welcome way, allowing the reader to pause and reflect on the character's inner workings in contrast to his outward projections of such through dialogue and action. Of course, Walker maintains a light tone even in such moments of despair; immediately after Giovanni practically eulogizes the world he thinks he is leaving, wiping away tears, one of his captors slaps him and quips, "You're not navy material, we regret, but have you tried the army?"

As the novel progresses, Brazzi and Giovanni's father come into contact more than once, and the plot careens forward as the reader learns that it was Brazzi, not Giovanni, who was meant to be captured and taken aboard the submarine. When Giovanni's father realizes that his granddaughter really did see something—the submarine becoming a sea monster in her parlance—he is able to reflect on his conversations with Brazzi and deduces his involvement in the extortion plot. Without revealing the ending of the novel for would-be readers, the relation between Brazzi and Giovanni's Slovene captors is emmeshed in a series of flashbacks to 1920 (eight years before the novel takes place), when the captors initially steal the submarine only to be greeted, upon their return to Trieste, by the news that fascist sympathizers

had set the Slovene National Hall on fire. Nataša, who is the wife of the submarine captain Stefan Pirjevec and also Brazzi's great love, dies in the fire, and thus is born the rivalry between Brazzi and the Pirjevec that underwrites the dramatic tension of the kidnapping in Cittanova in 1928.

While scholars of Slovenia and the former Yugoslavia will be familiar with the geographical shifts in the region in the wake of World War I, Walker takes care to outline the intricacies of local politics for a generalist audience. She includes details about Slovene schools being shut down in the region, for example, and books burned, as Italian generals assert the superiority of their race over the Slavs. The most compelling of such historical notes is refracted through conversations among characters about shifting surnames. The Micatovich family, for example, becomes Di Micheli, and when the child Silvana asks why, her grandfather patiently explains that Slavic names are being change because Mussolini, a fascist, does not like them. Later, Giovanni Micatovich/Di Micheli calls Istrian residents "the meat in the sandwich… caught between Yugoslavia and Italy" (22). Walker succeeds in providing a broad overview of the political implications of the region on everyday life, and when she integrates these explanations into organic conversations among her characters that reveal not just their political proclivities but something deeper about their character and motivations, her prose is deft and makes for easy reading. Yet at times, such information is delivered through third person omniscient narration. These meditations on the historical background of the region feel necessary but at times may also feel tiresome to someone well acquainted with the region. One additional minor editorial critique that the Slovene scholar may register: the novel uses both Slovene and Slovenian as adjectives irregularly, and it only occasionally uses diacritics (as in Nataša's name), but otherwise phonetically renders Slavic names.

Walker's own family history no doubt informs her interest in the region. She writes in the authorial biography at the end of the novel that her adoption papers read: "Nationality of mother, Yugoslavian." She eventually traced her lineage to Istria, where the novel is set, and she writes that there is some debate among her family as to whether her mother is Yugoslavian or Italian. Once can see Walker's fascination with this debate dramatized through the conversations and actions of her characters, who claim Italian or Slovene identity at various turns. This novel is Walker's first, and represents an exciting debut as well as and fast-paced, entertaining narrative that introduces the general reader to the history of Trieste and Istria.

Published by Pemore Press, the book is available for online order from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Smashwords, or direct from the publisher.

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