

Journeys in time, life stages

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“The Earth and Its Sorrows” by Robert Croke, iUniverse; 2010; 200 pages.

“The Earth and Its Sorrows” is a gentle, reflective third novel by Robert Croke of Lakeville, Conn. (author of “American Family” and “Sunrise.”)

It is an examination of one man's experience of both letting go and holding on, as he faces the effects of his son's death while simultaneously reconnecting with his place in the history of both his family and the greater purpose of human existence.

Ted Devaney is a man on the cusp of life changes. On the verge of retirement, he arranges the potential selling of his childhood home in a small Hudson Valley town. Venturing alone to prepare the documents and property, he is in a limbo-like emotional state, having vowed to suspend all outward communication regarding the death of his adult son, Paul, two years earlier.

However, it becomes very clear that decision has rendered an unintended side effect. It has left him emotionally paralyzed to the needs of his wife, Diana, and their other adult child, Beth, who is struggling to balance a failing marriage against a fractured relationship with her father.

Long adjusted to his muted feelings, Ted is caught off guard when he arrives at the homestead and experiences an epiphany-like sensation of Paul's presence co-mingled with the mysterious historical energies of the property. Overcome by his sense of immersion in the timeline of history, he is reflexively compelled to begin journaling family memories and tales.

As would be expected, a simple as-is home sale is delayed by his newfound drive to discover just how prevalent his childhood and family was in the larger scheme of larger sociological evolutions.

The most distinctive trait about “The Earth and Its Sorrows” is Croke's ability to craft three very specific stories within the same overall plot. It is not an exaggeration to insist that each could be a stand-alone novel if given further expansion. But by tying in parallel symbolism with Ted at the center, and sometimes the cause, of changes that set new paths in motion, Croke makes the three tales interdependent for the purpose of Ted's personal growth.

It may seem overly simplistic to state that the past, present and future are represented as the story progresses, but that is indeed the case. Whether uncovering the origins of a family estate, interacting closely with his estranged brother Tom and long-lost high

school girlfriend Elena to reset their lives onto more functional paths, or breaking out of the bonds of mourning to progress forward in his own family, Ted is on a metaphorical travel through time.

Crooke has a deft hand at lifting standard historical stories out of textbook constraints and injecting them with human realism and relevance. For example, when the reader is introduced to a vital historical document Ted uncovers in his quest, there is a hair-raising quality to the revelation of the signature and seal.

That may seem a minor point to highlight, but the importance is to demonstrate the actual character development of people who have become, by this point in time, almost mythical figures. Crooke resurrects them in a way that leads directly toward Ted's studies and discoveries. Rather than reciting names and dates in a basic regurgitation of common knowledge, he provides a colorful storyline of shared generational humanity.

Throughout it all, Ted slowly learns that even without immediate answers to life's most perplexing questions, there is a pattern set forth that reaches within and beyond in which the value of past pains can lead to a significantly broader scope of greater good. In fact, we witness his direct involvement in an environmental cause that culminates in an event clearly destined for historical documentation, and his unspoken realization of such helps progress his enlightenment and sense of self worth.

It is important to note that Crooke does not inject any specific religious beliefs into this. Rather, he uses Ted's personal journey to show a man regaining the emotional fuel he desperately needs to accept his own losses and begin a process of healing.

"The Earth and Its Sorrows" is a pleasant, surprisingly uncomplicated read. One would expect a novel covering such complex themes would be a grueling undertaking. But with calm, inviting prose Crooke presents a tale that on the surface has the appeared intensity of the same stroll Ted takes through the fields surrounding his property. Crooke's accomplishment is that in that stroll, the reader is infused with a greater sense of meaning than any so-called light read could ever deliver.