

A Book Review by Cynthia Ward, KnowBetter.com *Beguiling Dreams*, by Fred Stemme

Hank Braddock, son of the local minister, has just graduated high school, has a steady girlfriend and a job at the local newspaper. Although it is not quite the position he's yearning for, he's hopeful and is, according to the townspeople, 'an up and comer.' Yes, things are looking bright for this pimply-faced boy in the spring of 1915.

Hank turns down a shot at his dream job, reporting for the *Chicago Tribune*, because of his girlfriend's advice. He opts to stay in his small hometown and continue the job he has held since boyhood...the job of writing commercial ads for the local paper. Soon Hank is given assignments reporting actual news around town which include an interview, a train derailment and a strike at the local cannery. As he becomes more involved with his assignment about the strike (and a certain female outsider) it becomes difficult for him to report the news in an unbiased manner, thus alienating him from many in the community and even from his own family.

Beguiling Dreams takes us on a plethora of maturing experiences with this character as he grows from a trusting innocent and ambitious young boy to a man facing the 'beguilement' that has held him in his youthful and naïve outlook. As the plot moves forward, it gives depth to the characters with true-to-life dialogue and well-written description. I easily identified with the main character, Hank. He was visual and likeable. An example of this is from the Chapter 20 when Hank goes to the cannery to interview the owner about the strike and snoops around a bit. A quote from the book:

So this is what all the fuss is about. Hank copied the information into his notebook, then stepped through the wide doorway into one of the canning houses. The air was cool. Overhead, pigeons cooed. Long metal runs stretched to the back of the building interspersed with steel machinery. Not a soul could be seen.

Suddenly, a sharp voice came from behind him. "What're you doing here!"

Hank jumped and spun around. It was Pete Williams, one of the foremen. He tried to remain cheerful. "Oh hi, Mr. Williams. I have an appointment with Mr. Conner. I'm from *The Bee*, you know, and I was just looking around."

Mr. Williams glared at him. "Does Mr. Conner know you're out here?"

"Well, no."

The foreman's stare became menacing. "Then you have no business here! This is off limits unless you get permission from the office. So I'll kindly ask you to leave."

Hank looked the foreman in the eye. "Okay! I didn't know I was hurting anything."

Although his heart was beating a little faster, he brushed past Williams to show he wasn't afraid of him. As Hank walked across the yard, he could feel the foreman's stare on the back of his head.

Not only did Hank feel it, but I felt it as well. Through many page-turning events the story crescendos, then glides to a not-so-predictable end.

Stemme's writing is consistent with the times and era in which it is set. The early 1900's gave birth to labor laws, workers' unions and other issues concerning the blue collar or, should I say, 'tattered collar' workers. These were truly turbulent times of change. I find Stemme's portrayal of these happenings clear and precise. His fresh and original approach, along with an enjoyable plot and likeable characters makes *Beguiling Dreams* a charming and delightful read. I recommend this book to all history buffs, and anyone interested in a delightful tale of 'growing up and growing out' of a small town's boundaries. This book delivers exactly what it promises, and I look forward to delving into other books written by this talented author.