

Svoboda, Bill Stenson

Vancouver Sun, August 2008

When someone mentions the Doukhobors, many Canadians think first of nude protests and the grisly results of low-tech but effective fire-bombings by the Sons of Freedom. That's an unfair stereotype of the devout Russian immigrants who came to Canada in the early years of the 20th century with the financial support of Leo Tolstoy. As Bill Stenson writes in *Svoboda*, his impressive debut novel, "A Doukhobor was a Doukhobor was a Doukhobor."

Svoboda is both an examination of Canadian Doukhobors in the waning days of their conflict with the federal government in the 1950s and an account of the effect that cultural shift had on three generations of a Doukhobor family: There's Vasili Saprikin, a boy who comes of age in that tumultuous time; his mother, Anuta, and his deda (grandfather) Alexay, who emigrated to Canada.

Stenson (a writing teacher who lives in Victoria and is not a Doukhobor) has done a significant amount of research, and it shows on the page. *Svoboda* vividly depicts Doukhobor culture – its religious beliefs, rituals, lifestyle and history.

Occasionally, the rendering of that history is somewhat heavy-handed, with lengthy speeches detailing the movement of the Doukhobors, the nature of their leadership and the roots of their conflict with the Canadian government over taxation, education and military service. Normally, such info-dumps would be problematic, but here they are necessary to build the social backdrop against which the events of the novel play out.

These details are illuminated in the narrative by the human toll they take. *Svoboda* is a Russian word for freedom or liberty, and all three focal characters deal with freedom, its promises and its costs.

From Vasili, who spends much of his childhood in a residential school, being forced to learn English before being released into a world fundamentally changed; to Anuta, the single mother forced to turn away from her culture to provide a better life for her family; to Alexay, whose dreams of freedom are bound to his Doukhobor roots, liberty takes different forms and brings with it different issues.

It is testimony to the strength of Stenson's writing that the reader only becomes aware in retrospect that the story of the gradual assimilation of Doukhobor culture into Canadian culture isn't restricted to that group; it's the story of every immigrant culture struggling to keep a sense of itself while functioning within a dominant alien culture. The prejudices faced by the Doukhobors – prejudices which *Svoboda* rightly depicts as feeble and small-minded – have not disappeared. They have merely shifted to the new immigrants who are trying to find a place in the Canadian cultural mosaic.

Stenson's novel is an important work, a moving piece of fiction that not only casts light on a largely forgotten aspect of our history but also brings into focus our actions and attitudes today. — Robert Wiersema

Wiersema is a Victoria bookseller and the author of the novel Before I Wake.

Owen Sound Times, December 28, 2007

Bill Stenson writes and teaches in Victoria and is the co-founder of the *Claremont Review*. A short story writer whose fiction has been nominated for the Journey Prize, his exceptional debut novel, *Svoboda* (Thistle-down Press, \$18.95), is an exploration of the Doukhobor experience in western Canada.

Growing up in the 1950s, Vasili Saprikin knows that being a Doukhobor has altered how others see him. His father, Alexay, was five when he came to Saskatchewan from Russia in 1895. From him, Vasili learns the history of his people, telling his son, "I'm proud to be a Doukhobor myself. I have never set off a bomb or burned a house down."

Set against the backdrop of the Kootenay region in and around Nelson, B.C., *Svoboda* is not just about Doukhobors although the history of them resounds on nearly every page. Captured within its pages is a gentle, coming of age tale that stands very much on its own. This is a novel with a human touch that explores the vast gulf of misunderstanding that many Canadians have about the Doukhobors.

It is both illuminating and entertaining. — Andrew Armitage

Prairie Fire Review of Books, January 2009

Bill Stenson's novel deals with the issue of freedom. In fact the title of the book, *Svoboda*, is a Slavic word for freedom. The book is a thoughtful one set in the 1950s and 1960s and follows the course of Vasili Saprikin, who lives in the Doukhobor community of New Denver, British Columbia. The boy's father is dead and he lives with his mother, Anuta, and grandfather, Alexay. Vasili knows that others look upon him with different eyes because he is a Doukhobor, the clothes he wears are out of the ordinary, and his customs do not follow those of the rest of Canadian society.

The novel begins with Vasili building a bomb that brings frightful results. It is the time of the Sons of Freedom, of nude protests and fires and bombings. The Canadian government reacts with arrests, imprisonment and the wresting of children from their parents.

For two years Vasili is able to avoid the RCMP but when he is ten the authorities come and take him away to a residential school in Nelson at the foot of the Kootenay Mountains. Here the spoken language is English, not Russian, and separated from his family and without their support, Vasili enters a bewildering new world where Sunday is the only day families are allowed to visit. The Sundays prove to be traumatic for him: "Vasili was crying; he could not help it. Alexay seemed unable to speak and poked one of his long fingers through the fence." (81)

Though he is disconnected from his community, Vasili remains loyal to his family, and later, after his time at residential school, he joins his family, which by then has moved to Nelson.

What happens to Vasili during the time of his residential schooling? Slowly the boy begins to see what his life is about through each opportunity presented. He makes an effort to lift his eyes and see beyond his childhood. And what he sees is that the paths out of his loneliness are many. He meets Miss Hanks and Miss Nicholson, who introduce him to books. Miss Nicholson seems to know which books are suitable, and when she hands him a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Vasili finds himself sympathizing with the protagonist and that he is not the only one embarrassed by his awkward age: "If Holden Caulfield was threatened with homemade underwear he would have jumped out the window on page one hundred and four instead of just thinking about it . . ." (139) Vasili does not forget his roots but understands through his new connections that he is part of a larger community, that of humankind.

There are many symbols of freedom in the novel and one of them is the horse. One night Alexay tells Vasili about the horse he had when he was a boy: "Liberty you'd say in English . . . That horse got me in trouble one time." (133) He and a neighbourhood girl, Elena, rode across the river and could not find their way back. Stenson hints here that there can be no turning back once the way of freedom is chosen so be careful of the path you take. Alexay goes on to speak poignantly of the losses in life and that freedom does not come without consequences: "People come in and out of your life, Vasili. Some of the people you know now will be part of your life forever and some will disappear. . . . Elena and Svoboda. I lost on both accounts." (135)

In another instance, Sam and Walter, boys from his boyhood, try to persuade Vasili that freedom can be attained only through violence, but Vasili learns that the violence the boys advocate will not bring the freedom desired. For him independence takes a different shape. Gradually he realizes that the ability to act freely comes at a cost and that sometimes sacrifices must be made. It is his grandfather who teaches him this meaning through the building of a model airplane and then later a real plane; that a person starts out small and builds, that freedom comes in increments until the whole is realized. The book carries with it a message of hope and inspiration. In the closing pages of the novel, Vasili learns in order to gain freedom you must learn to trust yourself. As he says; "he (Vasili) wanted to believe the plane had gone somewhere successfully and it had his grandfather for cargo." (272) – Mary Barnes

Mary Barnes is a writer living in Wasaga Beach, Ontario.