Matewan Garden Club, by Iris Lee Underwood

Historical fiction, 241 pages, hardcover and paperback, published by Belle Isle Books, Richmond, Va.

Iris Lee Underwood takes readers on an enjoyable journey that features fascinating characters, powerful relationships, and heartbreaking events endured by families, friends, and residents in Matewan, located in hard scrabble West Virginia in the early 1900s.

The bonds that holds the community together are the community’s gardens and the passion of the Matewan Garden Club whose characters are unique, quirky, loyal, nosy, and passionate about making the world a better place through shared flowers, roots, soil, and seeds. The story is told from five different perspectives allowing readers to see how a community has a cast of many characters and how each contributes to the fabric that adds layers of strength and resilience to any town.

Henry is a young man trying to cope with a father critically injured in a mining incident, and wanting to help support his mother. When it appears that all hope will be lost, his life changes when he is mentored by Olaf Seminov, a local businessman and a Russian immigrant who is a brilliant botanist and businessman.

Olaf and his mother, Natalia, have left their family behind while escaping the Russian Revolution and are embracing the American dream to proudly carry on his family’s multigenerational heritage in botany and horticulture.

Annie Dill is the daughter of the local dentist who fulfills her family’s dream of attending college, the only girl and student in town able to do so. The community embraces her and celebrates her success, none more so than Henry, who sweeps her off her feet, convinces her parents that he is a worthy suitor, and shows a work ethic that will enhance the community and beautify it through gardens and horticulture.

Gertie, Henry’s mother, provides Henry with love and support, despite overwhelming hardships raising a young boy as a single parent. Her support shapes every aspect of Henry’s life, and demonstrates how acts of love can affect generations to come.

From the Russian Revolution to immigration to America, to the coal mines of West Virginia, readers will fall in love with the determination of Henry and his passion for taking care of his Mom at a young age. You will cheer for Annie, the girl who represents the hope and dreams of the community. Your heart will break with tragedies, and the hope these characters find in their families, in their community, and in their gardens.

Embracing every personality and event is the power of community contained in the Matewan Garden Club, and the need to be part of something bigger and more beautiful than ourselves and realize how gardens and relationships bloom when given the opportunity.

This book allowed me to meet some new best friends, to breathe in the smells of Hunt’s Feed & Seed store, to recognize the need for forgiveness, to plan and plant to provide hope for the future, and to fall in love with peonies, daylilies, and gladiolas.

Patrick J. McKay, Manager

Rochester Hills Museum at Van Hoosen Farm

Rochester, Michigan