

## **Book Review: The Sentimentalists**

### **The Sentimentalists by Johanna Skibsrud**

Published by Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver/Toronto in 2009

Winner of the 2010 Scotiabank Giller Prize, Johanna Skibsrud's novel tells the story of Napoleon Haskell, a Vietnam veteran now aging, who keeps his traumatic experiences buried underneath the very ordinary day-to-day lifestyle he maintains. I enjoyed the way that the narrator was able to bring her father to life through stories of the family unit with her mother and her sister Helen. He showed his love of the narrator's mother by building a sail boat for her although he himself didn't particularly like the water. Even after the breakup of the family, the two children continued to visit with their father every summer in an old house in Casablanca owned by his friend, Henry. The house has a mystery as well since it's built on top of an earlier town that was buried. The similarities with Napoleon are hard to ignore.

Through her lyrical prose, the narrator draws the reader into her emotional path from a childhood in a single parent family pulled between two parents, to acknowledging her ongoing love and loyalty towards her father. Since her own relationship broke down recently, she has reunited with her father during his last few years of life.

The book reminded me that we need to cherish the generation of older souls who either through their natural personality or due to their upbringing never learned how to express deep emotions openly. They have treasures in memories buried beneath the surface which can be gently unearthed by a loved one who has the patience to listen.

Readers who are attracted by nostalgia will enjoy *The Sentimentalists* since the writer has provided a glimpse into small town living along the border between Canada and the United States with detailed descriptions of the characters that lived there during her father's time.