

Will & Dena: Love and Life in World War II

Bob Rogers

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Reviewed by Richard R. Blake for Reader Views (11/09)

“Will & Dena: Love and Life in World War II” is a work of fiction based on the heroism of real people. Although the names of the primary characters have been changed, with the exception of Oakton and Cardinal County the references to historic men and women, the organizations, events, and places, are real.

During the years of the economic tyranny of the great depression, of lynching, and of the growth of Fascism, Lil’ Will struggles as a lumberjack working with his father. He falls in love with Dena, the local pastor’s daughter. Early conflict reflects the prevalence of class distinction even within families when Dena’s mother aspires to link her daughter with a more affluent young man in the community.

Young Will excels as an amateur baseball player. A group of influential white businessmen have a devised plan to exploit Will’s incredible intuitive baseball skills for financial profit by breaking “unwritten laws” of no black athletes on white teams. Their plan is foiled when the Ku Klux Klan counters with extreme measures of scare tactics and murder.

Will is forced to flee for his life, is aided by the local judge to change his identity and to enlist in the army. Will and Dena are secretly married. They are representative of millions of other young couples caught in the depredation of World War II. Will is assigned to the US Army’s 366th Infantry Regiment and the 92nd Infantry Division fighting Hitler’s Wehrmacht in Tuscany, Italy.

Will becomes bonded with three members of his infantry platoon. They become friends, like a tight-knit family. Together they experience the hateful use of court-martial and the war crimes of Wehrmacht. Facing the hardships of ongoing prejudice and both physical and verbal abuse, the four friends try to make the best of army life. They have an ongoing debate among themselves, defending their own unique reasons why they should fight the Germans and the fight to over turn the injustice and hatred behind the Jim Crow laws.

Rogers, a former army captain, Vietnam War veteran, and a charter member of Baltimore, MD’s 9th and 10th (Horse) Cavalry Association is an avid baseball fan. He is well qualified to author this timely and thought-provoking novel.

Rogers’ careful attention to dialog consistent with the time, culture, and geographical setting, his strong word choices, and excellent characterizations, and story transitions give life to his complex plot.

“Will & Dena: Love and Life in World War II” is historical fiction at its best. Bob Rogers skillfully conveys the irony of a country that combats racism abroad while simultaneously promoting a most menacing form of racism within its own borders. Rogers uses the platform of fiction to communicate a valuable message relevant to today’s reader.