

Bittersweet Journey

Marching Home: To War and Back with the Men of One American Town by Kevin Coyne (Viking).

By

Samuel Freedman

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Fall 2003

During the near decade that Kevin Coyne spent re-searching and writing *Marching Home*, an account of six World War II servicemen from the same New Jersey town, he privately titled the work *The Best Years of Their Lives*. He meant the phrase as an homage to William Wyler's film of almost the same name, and the choice of such a model speaks deeply of the ambitions and achievements of Coyne's penetrating book.

Made just one year after VJ Day, *The Best Years of Our Lives* offers a far more shaded version of World War II than have all the Greatest Generation books and movies of recent vintage. The defeat of fascism was every bit a just war in Wyler's view, but it was also a war that took a toll on its warriors, most indelibly shown by the disabled veteran portrayed by Harold Russell, who had lost his own hands during the war.

Coyne works a broader canvas than that of the film that inspired him, but with similar intimacy. His book is both personal and epic. *Marching Home* centers on six young men from Freehold, New Jersey, a sleepy county seat set amid potato fields. Black, white, Christian, Jewish, immigrant, native, they constitute a microcosm of the nation. Coyne observes them, and their town, in minutely etched details, yet *Marching Home* follows these characters both across vast expanses of space, as they join the battle from Normandy to New Guinea, and through a half century of time, from the 1940s to the 1990s.

The journey can be described only as bittersweet, for the heroes of *Marching Home* win the war only to lose the peace, and Coyne's attention to this tragic duality elevates the book into the finest kind of contemporary history. After Freehold's servicemen survive kamikaze attacks, ambushes, disease, and anti-aircraft flak, and after the victory parade on the courthouse square, they watch their hometown fall apart. The rug factory that employs two of the veterans moves to the low-wage state of North Carolina. A race riot ravages the modest downtown. Suburban sprawl claims the surrounding farmland, and even the veterans who profit by it, one by building homes and another by selling the family orchard, feel chagrin at the assimilation of a place they had thought distinctive, wholly their own. It seems appropriate to learn in *Marching Home* that Freehold was home in the 1960s to a teenaged musician named Bruce Springsteen, because in Coyne's book one is immersed in the events that inform so many of Springsteen's socially conscious songs.

Even Coyne's retelling of World War II, filled though it is with vivid scenes of bravery as well as a tenderly drawn romance, has an astringent side. The black serviceman whom he follows, Bigerton Lewis, gets stuck in a segregated unit that is largely denied combat. At war's end, it guards German prisoners who are treated better by white American soldiers than are their black comrades. These episodes prefigure the racism Lewis faces in postwar Freehold, when he futilely tries to join the police force.

A popular and respected instructor in narrative writing at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, Coyne brings a delicate touch and an exacting eye for detail to all that he describes, starting with a twister that plunges Freehold into darkness and ending with a commemorative parade of enfeebled veterans. His first two books—*A Day in the Night of America* and *Domers: A Year at Notre Dame*—showed he could render scenes splendidly, but not that he could assemble them into a single, overarching saga, something much bigger than the sum of its parts. With *Marching Home*, Coyne has not only met that challenge; he has written one of the essential books about twentieth-century America.

Samuel G. Freedman is a professor of journalism at Columbia. His most recent book is Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry.

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