

Metaphors ring loud and clear

Nine Bells for a Man

By Peter Unwin

Dundurn, 268 pages, \$18.99

REVIEWED BY PETER O'BRIEN

Death permeates this novel, from the opening image, of a few men clinging to an airtight casket in the middle of the night in the middle of a lake, to the final moment of the book, a few words etched onto a headstone about the man whose voice and actions propel the book.

Peter Unwin's first novel (after the story collection *The Rock Farmers*) is a retelling of the sinking of the *Mayflower* in Ontario's Kaminisseg Lake in November, 1912. Nine lives were lost on that icy evening, but three that clung to the floating casket were saved.

Using a wealth of archival material, including oral histories, academic studies and the work of local historians, Unwin captures the last days of pioneer Canada. He follows Robert Pachal, a prairie

farmer, as he travels across the country, first by train and then by boat, with the coffin of his brother-in-law, hoping to bring him back east for a proper burial among his family.

Canada was in the midst of great change: from the rural to the urban, from a relatively simple engagement with the land to a more complicated relationship to cities and technology. Unwin's book is infused with details of these pioneer days, and the often incomprehensible ways that countries and people change.

At times, the writing verges on the methodical and pedestrian, as though Unwin is too steeped in the years of research that have gone into writing this book. When he lets metaphor take the reins, and permits room for his natural talent for storytelling, the writing can be quite engaging: "Yorkton, Saskatchewan, rose like a hasty serving of cups and saucers on a rough board. . . . A dozen wagons, one of them listing badly, clung to the land like ravens."

The title of the book comes from the number of church bells rung at matins for the dead, "seven bells for a woman, and nine for a man." At its best, the book's tragic events take on a life of their own and the reader can hear those bells ring frighteningly loud and clear.

Peter O'Brien is a Toronto editor and writer.