

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

SATURDAY, JULY 1, 2000

FICTION

The impotence of being earnest

A RECKONING OF ANGELS

By Stuart James Whitley
Great Plains, 299 pages, \$19.95

REVIEWED BY
PETER O'BRIEN

As the title suggests, *A Reckoning of Angels* has rather epical ambitions. Unfortunately, the path it chooses is pedestrian and formulaic.

It's the story of two vastly different men: Jan Dalmynyshyn, a poor but handsome labourer from a village in Ukraine, who uses his homespun wit and physical strength to fashion a new life in Western Canada, and Byron Bloode, the scion of an established Winnipeg family, who seems to lurch from one life-defining disaster to the next. Their different lives crash into one another during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.

Dalmynyshyn is inspired and challenged by all that he comes in contact with, including a reading club in his native country, work in the Pennsylvania and Klondike mines, the love of a beautiful Cree woman, and acts of racism. Bloode's ignorant ways are brought successively lower by a scandalous love affair, which forces him to flee Winnipeg, a treasonous act in battle in South Africa, and other marks of his weak fibre.

Along the way we get clichéd bits of wisdom: "We may be poor as mice, but God gave us a brain," Dalmynyshyn is told early on, and Bloode thinks to himself that the "past was never past. Its grip on the future was as certain as the mistakes men seemed destined to keep repeating."

We also get an overly earnest authorial hand leading us through the book, with such words of guidance as: "An affiliation with God was necessary for reflection on the spiritual wellsprings of a man's life, but it was the interconnection with other human beings that provided the embracing form for a real existence."

Stuart James Whitley is the Deputy Minister of Justice for the government of Yukon, and this is his second book. The historical and thematic reach of *A Reckoning of Angels* is broad, and demonstrates Whitley's moral storytelling sympathies, rich imagination and considerable facility with dialogue. If only he would remove the earnestness and didacticism from his writing, he would create something much more powerful.

◆ ◆ ◆

Writer and editor Peter O'Brien worked on the Alberta oil rigs before making his way to Montreal and then Toronto, where he now resides.