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No Reck'ning Made
By Joanne Greenberg
Henry Holt; 296 pp.

We barely even know her name. At least, her real name. Most who have read her know her as Hannah Green, the name she attached to *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* to protect her small children from ridicule. Yet, Joanne Greenberg writes with a subtle insight and generous compassion which demand wider notice.

Greenberg sets *No Reck'ning Made*, newest of the 14 books she has issued under her own name, at the point where personal integrity and socio-economic forces collide, the place, she implies, which generates powerful forces shoving American culture increasingly deeper into mediocrity.

As the First World War draws to a close, nine year-old Clara Coleman has her Moment of Knowing as she hikes three miles uphill toward school. It's a squalid school for the children of poor Colorado silver miners in a decaying economy where "there was a slow, long leaching away of people, an abandoning of houses and stores, and of the mines to their desolation on the sides of the mountains."

Living with a demeaning, misogynist father and wretched, dying mother has filled Clara with grief and fear but not broken her tough spirit. Like Faulkner's Sarty Snopes at nine seeing the de Spain mansion and realizing there is a force of decency stronger than his father's evil, Clara catches sight of Callan School and realizes that in "the power of the books, pencils, the teachers, the school building, was the power of order, regularity, fact and its mastery." Learning and teaching could form Clara's pathway off the dying mountainsides.

And for a while, they do. But it is no easy path. Her love of learning helps her drink in literature, Latin, math, science and history, but she is destitute, her school closes when she is 12 and her tutors of four years move away from this land never visited by the prosperity of the Roaring Twenties. That she enters a state teachers college is a hard-won miracle. She survives by doing housework, reading to laundry workers and living in impoverished Spanish Town, until the college's dean learns her shanty address and threatens expulsion.

After graduating, Clara lives a spartan life outside Denver substitute teaching until Pearl Harbor is attacked, when she begins work at a defense plant and lives in the Mexican barrio of Pueblo. Enter Andy Percival, who, because of a childhood bout with polio must do his war work as a civilian. Harboring his own childhood scars, Andy patiently outlasts Clara's longstanding mistrust of men, wins the reader's affection and Clara's hand and escorts her back to the very mountainsides she'd escaped where she becomes teacher, then principal, of her own school.

Unfortunately, at this point a poignant, exquisitely written novel becomes a hurried zip toward 62 year-old Clara's final battle. The covers of this book are simply too close together. Rather than explore the second half of Clara's life with the same close-up deliberateness as the first, it feels as if Greenberg, knowing she had created absorbing, affecting characters, rushed to see how the rest of their lives would turn out.

Yet, the conflict Greenberg creates is all too dishearteningly real. Clara ministers lovingly to the intellectual and personal needs of these "scabby, nit-ridden, ragged and barefoot" children for decades, while the area swells with trendy newcomers with no love for the land, only a talent for turning ski resort snow into gold.

These frosty yuppies don't want Clara teaching their children poetry. When she instills in a child a sense of purpose, they see it as infringing on parental rights. When she hand-picks lice off their children, they see it as sexual abuse. Clara has brought old-fashioned commitment into our new-fashioned litigious world where she faces charges that could end a lifetime of dedication.

Greenberg leaves us shocked, facing a growing abyss we may find no way out of. But she also leaves us too quickly, leaving a frustrated hunger for more of an otherwise wonderful thing.