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AFTER THE WAR
By Richard Marius
Alfred A. Knopf. 637 pp.

In 1977, one year before he left Tennessee to head Harvard's expository writing program, history professor/novelist Richard Marius described a novel-in-progress about "an immigrant who arrives in Bourbonville [Tennessee] in the autumn of 1917. He has been wounded fighting in the Belgian army, and now he must make a new existence for himself. His coming unhinges the town."

Fifteen years later, opulently enlarged, the plan once entitled *The Immigrant* emerges as Marius's third novel, *After the War*. It is not merely good. It is *amazingly* good.

The book does, however, take its time clenching us in its grasp. Rather, we drift in, disoriented and wary, like the novel's protagonist, Paul Alexander. Born Greek and educated in Belgium, Paul has spent almost three years recovering from a shrapnel wound suffered early in World War I. Vaguely hoping to find the father who abandoned him, Paul wanders to east Tennessee where he takes a job as chemist in a Bourbonville railroad iron foundry.

Yet Paul is lost at the intersection of now and then. Wherever he turns he sees the specters of Guy and Bernal, his vibrant schoolmates, both killed at the dawn of the war, both everpresent in Tennessee to remind him they've sworn to remain together always.

For the first third of the novel, Marius braids the stories of Paul in Belgium and Paul in Tennessee. They yield an achingly engrossing character, a studious boy grown into a pained young man who has recovered neither in body from his wounds nor in spirit from the deaths of his friends. He admits, "In the blackness of my continuing melancholy, a still, hard weight lay on my heart, a weight palpable beneath my ribs as though the war and death and the meaninglessness of every human act had settled there."

With his Southern gift for oral history, Marius weaves a luxuriant tapestry of wartime and post-war conflicts which, for a sleepy Southern town in fragile transition, cannot be resolved by less than disaster.

The conflicts grow from the characters Marius creates. Will Bourbonville move into the industrial age, as Moreland Pinkerton urges it to do, "Pinkerton the great and terrible"? Crude, ambitious and overbearing, Pinkerton built the railroad car works on swampland decades before and has provided paychecks for scores of men, black and white, sharecropper and carpenter. "I brought this town progress," he roars. "This place is my tabernacle, by God." Had he not suffered humiliation in the "Spanish War," Pinkerton believes, he might have become President of the United States.

At the town's other pole is Brian Ledbetter, who first appeared in Marius's 1969 novel, *The Coming of Rain*. Ledbetter, father of five grown stepsons, emblemizes an agrarian, more chivalrous South. During the Civil War, Ledbetter had fought for the Union, but his wife, speaking for the town, says, "We've all forgive him for that."

As the World War closes, however, Bourbonville (based on Lenoir City, just southwest of Knoxville) finds it impossible to forgive Ledbetter for hiring M. P. Brown. In 1912, M. P. set off as a merchant seaman and two years later joined the French army where he learned French, aviation mechanics and Bolshevism. Returning home, the young black man preaches social revolution. When Ledbetter hires Brown as his aerial chauffeur it is more than the reviving Ku Klux Klan of Bourbonville can stand. It's hard enough to keep blacks down on the farms and foundries after they've seen Paris, impossible if they are in the air.

Absorbing as his new world is, Paul continues to see it through the filter of his past. Tempted to love by both a spirited teenager and a self-possessed journalist, he muses instead on his first love in Belgium. Prodded to taste life, he remains haunted by memories of death. For a long time he believes "the past is the only place we are at home." The past seems constant and offers the security of remaining fixed, unlike the

mercurial present. "You can't step in the same river twice," he tells Ledbetter, "it changes."

"Hell, you can't step in the same river once," he's answered. "It changes while you got your feet in it." For Ledbetter, life's secret is simple, though not facile: "If we can love, and if we got people to love, we've got all there is."

Perhaps memory might even prove a way of building the harmony Paul seeks to construct of his world. Perhaps it is the gift we receive for our loyalty to those we've loved, the means to have snowflakes in June and morning at twilight. Perhaps it can sustain us when the present looks as long and narrow and dark as a tunnel.

Paul's hard-won epiphanies appear with sudden clarity, emerging from a novel constructed like a Gothic castle in its intricate variety, filled with nooks and even some blind alleyways, a book of abundance and mass. With glacial momentum, Marius shapes a complex world of loyalty, hope and creative suffering balanced against prejudice, injustice and provincial smallmindedness.

As one compelling character exits another enters, each with his or her own Dickensian quirks. The colorful supporting cast is populated by devoted country doctors and opportunistic politicians and moonshiners and women straining against the narrow walls of earlier possibilities. Collectively, they showcase Marius's remarkable knack for voices, here echoing off a background of the Great Smokies which Marius renders with description that glistens like dew on mountain laurel.

This is not, finally, the book Marius predicted in 1977. It grew to far more than the story of an immigrant whose coming unhinges a town. It became a feast of Americana, rich in history and biography, riveting in plot, lavish in humanity, graced at all points by keen intelligence and masterful prose.

Those planning a two week vacation with a few hours set aside each day for reading could scarcely bring with them better company.