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CHOICES

By Mary Lee Settle

Doubleday/Nan A. Talese. 377pp.

Like fellow Southerners George Garrett, Elizabeth Spencer and the late Peter Taylor, Mary Lee Settle has produced superb fiction for decades yet remains shamefully underread. Those who miss this sage artist's thirteenth novel, however, will suffer an irreparable loss, for *Choices* will certainly prove one the finest novels of 1995.

As Spring dawns in 1993, Melinda Kregg Dunston, 82, lies dying on the Italian coast. There is little cause for regret, though, as Melinda's has been an unusually rich and meaningful existence. Life, said Falstaff, is a shuttle, and, as Melinda's shuttle voyage ends, the reader slips back to its beginning.

In Richmond, Va. in 1930, Melinda is a bright and lovely debutante in a world that doesn't reward belles for questioning too closely the established order. Surrounded by beaux who say things like, "Don't worry about [exploited laborers]. Leave that to ugly women. You're much too beautiful to be high-minded," Melinda has become the naïve product of a land where a mind is a terrible thing to waste on a girl.

Her father's suicide changes that. Hoping to leave his family safely rich with his insurance money, he instead turns Melinda away from safety and points her toward service, danger and a lifetime of championing the oppressed. As she leaves Richmond, her aunt Boodie extracts a promise that Melinda will keep: "Do *everything*," Boodie urges.

As a Red Cross volunteer, Melinda crosses the Kentucky border to feed the starving families of coalminers. It's far from the genteel volunteer work her mother had pictured. Trying to unionize, miners are starved, blacklisted, evicted, jailed and shot by hired thugs. The Red Cross won't let Melinda feed strikers nor speak with reporters, as both unions and journalists are tools of the "Roosian Reds."

Melinda sees emaciated girls of 20 bent like old women and signs reading YOUR DOGS EAT BETTER THAN OUR KIDS, and she herself lands in jail for feeding the hungry. She has lost her innocence. And she has heard from a Kentucky widow another piece of life-defining advice: "My husband used to say you can argy all day long, but when you wake up at three o'clock in the mornin' a thing is either wrong or it's right, and either you take a drink or do something about it."

Kentucky becomes just the first of the battlefields Melinda enters to "do something about it." After a period of calm in New York—the Stork Club by night, Katherine Gibbs and vocational schooling by day—Melinda sails in 1937 for Spain to

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wage battle against Franco's fascism. She's just what is needed: a young woman who can speak Spanish, type and drive ambulance trucks.

But even Kentucky's gunfire hadn't prepared her for the massive carnage she sees in Spain. There "she crossed a barrier she would never be able to recross. It was being at war instead of going to war, and it was like nothing she could ever have known." In the most vivid prose about the Spanish Civil War since *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Settle shows Melinda stepping over piles of corpses, working to exhaustion beside nuns with the hearts of Madonna and the mouths of sailors, rushing "to take blood from the newly dead and pump it into the veins of the dying." And all in apparent futility, as Franco is copiously supplied by Hitler and Mussolini while the democracies stand idly by.

"Spain," Melinda will later recall, "broke our hearts.... Something died there." But it was not for nothing. Not only does Melinda meet the love of her life in Spain, the young and idealistic British physician Tye Dunston, but a newly orphaned six year-old, Maria, takes her hand and never lets it go, becoming her first adopted child. And Tye reminds her what makes even a losing battle for justice essential: "Tye said *anyway*. You do it anyway."

What also dies in Spain is Melinda's youth, so that her remaining battles take on more muted, autumnal tones. But she fights them with every bit as much conviction.

Back in London with Maria, Tye and his kindly aristocratic mother, herself a former suffragette who ran soup kitchens for the poor, Melinda comforts victims of V-2 bombings and supports her husband's efforts to launch the National Health Service.

Born a Southerner, though, Melinda's last active battle fittingly takes place in 1965 in Mississippi, where Boogie's son, a civil rights worker, has disappeared. The wheel approaching full circle, the former debutante Melinda heads into the Deep South as a spy in her own country to find the boy: "I can go in disguise....I'll be a white lady with a white mind and white gloves in a black Buick." The scene has changed, and it is now a woman in late middle age fighting, but the battle has always been the same, for the faces of hate, of fear at not being able to hold one's advantage, of rage at being blocked from the pursuit of happiness, are the same wherever she's been. And she's spent a lifetime fighting the good fight, leaving little undone.

Settle, who herself left college near the start of WWII to enlist in the British Royal Air Force, has written an eyewitness sojourn through the history of our century, but the book's artistic magic lies in its details, how vividly she gives that history local habitations and names. We see the coal-streaked faces and hear the fighter planes' engines and sniff both the magnolias and the terror.

More than that, though, we grow enrapt by Settle's richly human tapestry woven of wisdom, experience and compassion around a woman whose heart seems to beat in constant sympathy with the hearts of others: "The day her heart refused to creak and break a little," Melinda thinks, "was the day she wanted to be dead."

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This is so vibrant and honest and affirmative a book that you'll wonder why, at its end, you find tears in your eyes.