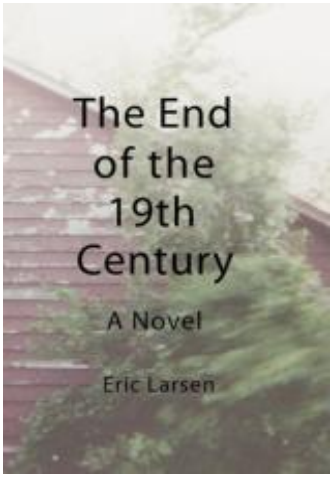
The End of the 19th Century

by Eric Larsen



About the Book

The End of the 19th Century is the third in a quartet of novels starting with **An American Memory** (Algonquin, 1988), followed by **I Am Zoë Handke** (Algonquin, 1992), and leading to this present book, **The End of the 19th Century**. The fourth in the tetralogy will be "The Decline and Fall of the American Nation." Together, the books tell the story of two American families, one with mid-nineteenth-century roots in Norway, the other in Germany. Malcolm Reiner is the central character in "An American Memory" while the beautiful and grave young woman he marries, Zoë Handke, narrates the book that has her own name in its title. Both Malcolm and Zoë are lucky to survive childhoods and early adulthoods in dysfunctional and severely tortured families, a dysfunction that symbolizes the broader dysfunction of the larger American society and culture around them. The portraits of characters in the novels are detailed and close, while at the same time the settings Malcolm and Zoë live in are symbolic of greater themes--as with the "disappearing" farm that Malcolm Reiner lives on as he comes of age, a farm that suggests the change in America from a successful nineteenth-century agrarian society to a late-twentieth-century place that proves incapable of knowing itself "in the context of no context." The novels are sometimes closely analytic, sometimes sweepingly poetic, while both their author and their narrators remain determined to find and know the truths of their own lives and of the lives of those around them--both present and past--as well as the truth of the nation they live in. That kind of knowledge can become almost more than one can bear--and yet if people don't try to gain that knowledge, what will they be left with? Ignorance of self, nation, or the meaning of existence can lead only to the loss of all three.

Discussion Guide

1. The book is a novel of growing up, but a different kind of novel from the usual run. What is the novel REALLY about as Malcolm Reiner describes and analyzes his own growing up? Does his growing up symbolize something beyond itself?

2. The novel is very much concerned with the subject of time and therefore with the subject of history. Does it end up providing a theory of history? A definition of history? Where and how?

3. Why are there pictures throughout the book?

4. The novel is replete with symbols of various kinds and sorts. The largest is probably the symbolism of both the farm's and the town's gradual disappearance altogether by book's end. What are its meanings?

5. The book may seem pessimistic, almost hopeless, to some readers. But its author maintains that his novel is also optimistic and provides or creates elements of the positive and of hopefulness. Does it?

6. In the following exchange in an interview , the author argued that literature, if it's to be meaningful, has the obligation to tell the truth "about the nature of our lives within a state of existence." Does his own novel succeed in realizing that kind of truth?

Author Bio

Eric Larsen was born in Northfield, Minnesota, where, after going to the public schools, he graduated from Carleton College in the class of 1963. He took an M.A. in English from the University of Iowa and in 1971 completed his Ph.D. there. For his dissertation, under the direction of William Cotter Murray, he wrote a volume of original stories accompanied by his own critical commentaries.

In 1971, after living abroad for two years, Larsen joined the English Department of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, in the City University of New York, and remained there until his retirement in early 2006. He is married to the editor Anne Larsen. The couple have twogrown daughters.

Critical Praise

"I believe this book is a profound act of memory, a sort of American Proust. . . .I was mesmerized in reading."

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