4-16-2020

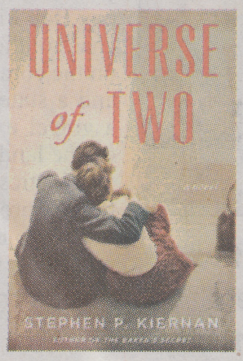
A physicist, an organist, and a bomb

"Universe of Two"

Stephen P. Kiernan

William Morrow, 2020.

"Universe of Two" is a wartime love story of a physicist, Charlie Fisk, and an organist, Brenda Dubie. They meet in 1943 when he wanders into Dubie's Music, a Chicago store that sells sheet music and Hammond organs, while she is minding the shop. He asks her to play for him and discovers that she was accepted at Oberlin to study the organ but couldn't go because of the war. Asked what he does, he says he's one of "a team of young guys doing calculations for the government." He is indeed a young guy—three months short of 18—and he's so modest that he doesn't mention that he has graduated from Harvard. He's also tall, skinny, and diffident, not the kind of guy 19-year-old Brenda has always thought she deserves. There's something about him, though … and most miraculous of all, her sharp-tongued mother, who manages the store and is active in some undisclosed work with War Wives, likes him tremendously. Soon Charlie falls in love with Brenda, and she, more reluctantly, with him.



It would be a perfectly standard story, except that Charlie's "calculations for the government" are involved in developing the atomic bomb. Initially, that knowledge is kept secret from him, even when, just as romance seems to be blooming, he is sent to Los Alamos to work with the Manhattan Project. There, his skill in soldering electrical components for the detonator team earns him the nickname "Trigger," and he comes under increasing pressure from his superiors. As the nature of the project's goals is gradually revealed, Charlie's doubts increase; but talking about the project's work is absolutely forbidden, so he can't air the reasons for his reservations to Brenda, who has taken a job as a church organist in Santa Fe in order to be near him. Unfortunately, she assumes he is just doubting his own talents, and she tells him to man up and be a good soldier. He does, and so when the full horror of Manhattan Project's success becomes clear, they are both racked by guilt largely absent in the victorious country. Charlie is rewarded by acceptance in Stanford's physics PhD program, only to find that students and faculty alike consider "Trigger" a celebrity. Brenda, seeing his anguish and remembering his skills at fixing the ailing organ she played in Santa Fe, urges him to drop out and take a job as an organ repairman—and subsequently supports him as he becomes a consummate organ builder.

One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson

The story is told in a double narrative. Charlie's third person narrative drives the scientific part of the plot, brilliantly capturing his technical and moral struggles and presenting the Manhattan Project from within. Brenda's first person narrative is the retrospective view of the old woman she has become. Her opening paragraphs assert the youthful stupidity that made her ignore Charlie's strengths; they also recall the guilt Brenda still feels in her old age: "There's no denying that I used my influence to make him do terrible things. Irreversible things." The pair seek redemption by rejecting science's role in human destruction, choosing rather to use physics to accentuate humanity's great artistic achievements, here symbolized by Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor.

Charlie's story is very loosely based on the career of Charles Fisk, who worked for the Manhattan Project, dropped out of Stanford, and became the famous organ builder of C. B. Fisk Company. Kiernan has used it to meditate on the moral quandaries of war, the necessity of love, and the greatness to which human beings can aspire. It's a wonderful read.