

## **Review of *Secrets on the Family Farm* by Dominick J. Cibrario**

reviewed by James F. Fisher, Carleton College

Readers who have followed Nick Cibrario's fiction will recall the bizarre, blood-and-guts tale of adventure in Nepal set forth in his trilogy of novels, *The Pomelo Tree*, *The Harvest*, and *The Shamans*. Those stalwart readers who hung in there for the duration (dealing with witchcraft, drugs, organ harvesting, and death, they were not for the faint of heart) will be more than a little curious to see what he's come up with for a sequel. His first books are a hard act to follow.

The setting for *Secrets on the Family Farm* could not be more different from that of his trilogy – nothing exotic (at least in the conventional, geographical sense) down on the Wisconsin farm. This time the characters are all people we can readily identify with (well...maybe not after we get to know them), because they are all right out of middle America. Not only are they inhabitants of the heartland, but they represent the quintessential rural backbone of the nation – the much-vaunted and much-praised family farm, and the core American family values it represents – or so we think before Cibrario lets us in on its dirty little secrets. O. Henry once said that every family has its own hidden drama. *Secrets on the Family Farm* reveals the inner workings of one such family.

As we move along through this novel, we discover a side of rural American life we don't expect. As with the trilogy, the faint of heart need to beware of what they are getting into here also. If you are looking for stories about 4-H clubs and the dignity of tilling the soil through the sweat of one's brow, you will be disappointed. At one time or the other in his 31 carefully constructed chapters, Cibrario treats in some depth - and with suspense because we don't seem them coming - such topics as homosexuality, alcoholism, marital infidelity, adultery, child abuse, insanity, suicide, and murder. Not exactly traditional family values politicians like to talk about.

These somewhat unsavory topics are served up against the backdrop of the culture of those times which Cibrario evokes, for those old enough to remember them, with fondness and nostalgia. This essentially historical novel, set in the early 1950s, includes cameo appearances by such performers, athletes, and personalities as Loretta Young, Bing Crosby, Vivien Leigh, Micky Mantle, Clark Gable, Charlie Chaplin, Ginger Rogers, Doris Day, and the Lone Ranger. He also reminds us of such signs of the times as drive-in movies, Amos and Andy programs, and Nash and Studebaker cars. For those who are not old enough to have lived through this era, and this presumably includes most readers, this novel will serve as an excellent introduction to those bygone days.

What is revealing in all this is that the idolized family farm is riven with contradictions, which Cibrario sets forth in vivid and uncompromising detail: the onerous life of the farm wife, the pressures on and consequent drunkenness of men working off-farm, Catholic priests involved in affairs with women, as well as sexual exploitation of children, and most interestingly, the deleterious effects of World War II on both the men who left to fight it, and the women they left behind to somehow manage such things as the family farm. The war is portrayed as having changed people so dramatically that they cannot recover from its pernicious effects, and even if they have, the Korean War has moved in to take its place.

Thus the novel is both a fictive ethnography of middle American rural life – as it is really lived, according to Cibrario, not as it is imagined or portrayed in Norman Rockwell paintings – and a sobering account of the way the effects of the war continue for decades to form and distort the lives of those who were active in it. Cibrario's novel reminds us that life with all its tawdry little secrets displayed is more interesting and arresting than the anemic caricatures we usually have to settle for.