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Year of the Zinc Penny

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Scraped together but still clinging
At the end of the century like barnacles

Faceless as cliffs we keep listening

For something, what is it, some knock
At the door....

("Who Goes There")

In the penetrating music and imagery of this last poem, Goedicke reasserts her faith in the world and in our capacity to embrace its dark mystery. Like "some knock at the door," her poems continue to make us want to act, to get up and see what's there.

Lorraine Ferra

The Year of the Zinc Penny by Rick DeMarinis W.W. Norton, 1989

Anyone familiar with the earlier fiction of Rick DeMarinis will come to *The Year of the Zinc Penny* with high expectations. Happily, he will not be disappointed in the least. In fact, he's likely to be lifted to such heights of pleasure in what DeMarinis does with the novel form and in particular with the subject he has chosen as to go away grumbling from the myriad lesser fictions that attempt similar things and do not even touch his skill.

The year is 1942/3 when zinc pennies replaced pure copper because World War II made copper, along with many other products, a precious commodity to be shunted to the war effort. Trygve Napoli is a 10-year-old, who will turn 11 in this crucial year. He's of mixed Norwegian/Italian heritage and only wishes that he had a completely neutral, wholly American name like Charles Jones, Bill Tucker or Bob Smith, so he wouldn't excite the attention of anyone in any setting in which he finds himself. He has just spent four years with his unlovely, uncommunicative Norwegian grandparents in Montana, abandoned by his mother, who then sends for him to join her and his new step-father in Los Angeles. But disaster strikes again when he's put in a foster home because of the adults getting into trouble with the law. He suffers a sense of displacement and fear of further displacement and

abandonment, but finally the family, full of odd lots as it is, gathers in a crowded apartment. The group includes his mother, Aunt Ginger, her husband when he's on shore leave, his older cousin, a Canadian who will turn 16 during the year and aspires to join the Marines and Mitchell, his draft-avoiding milkman step-father, who aspires to leading-man roles in Hollywood.

The story of this momentous year is told entirely through Tryg's eyes, ears, a mind and feelings. He is both an astonishing young boy and a very ordinary one—ordinary in the sense of partaking of all the events current in L.A. at the time and responding pretty much as any 10-year-old boy might, but always with the difference of having a sensibility that goes beyond the expected to question life and death, develop ticks and fevers and nosebleeds in response to the terrible uncertainties of his life, mirrored by the uncertainties of the war and the people he actually knows who are at risk because of it. DeMarinis captures perfectly the ambiance of Los Angeles in that era: zoot-suit wars, upheavals in family life, bigotry in restrictive renting, the way classrooms were conducted, the rootlessness of a highly transient population and the fears of plane-spotting, coast-watching and monitoring of shortwave radio sets to pick up war news and encoded signals around the world. Living in L.A. as they do, movies are a primary entertainment, along with popular radio shows, and Trygve's imagination is both inflamed and disturbed by vampire and war movies.

Everything in this book is perfectly paced and perfectly written. Details are accurate and in the language and character of this highly individual and intriguing young boy. There is nothing sentimental, though there is much sentiment. People's feelings run high and Tryg is privy to scenes of drinking, violence, bigotry, fear, sex and tenderness. At the end of this eventful year, when he's once again on his way back to Montana, his family having been evicted from their apartment and once again fragmented by circumstance, he travels by train alone and goes to the bathroom to sit on a closed lid and smoke.

On the wall opposite me, someone had drawn
a shaky Kilroy. The little beady eyes stared
at me. The little hands gripped the wall
for dear life.

What an ending, absolutely true to everything that went before. And what a way to leave us, holding on for dear life for him, but exactly right, too.

Laurel Speer