

the
LITERARY HILL



A Compendium of Readers, Writers, Books, & Events

BY KAREN LYON

Burdened by Secrets

“It’s easy to feel like a stranger in Washington, D.C.,” says the unnamed narrator of Frederick Reuss’s new novel, “A Geography of Secrets.” “Like many who call DC home, I am not from here but of here... It’s a strange triangulation of geography, psychology, and fate and makes for great confusion, a confusion that calls for – no, demands – a map.” The unmoored speaker is a cartographer whose map of his own family is dramatically redrawn after the death of his father, a foreign service officer with a lifetime of secrets.

Noel Leonard is also a mapmaker of sorts, analyzing satellite images for the Defense Intelligence Agency to guide drone missile attacks in Afghanistan. When a miscalculation leads to the destruction of a school full of children, the burden of his secret threatens to destroy him,

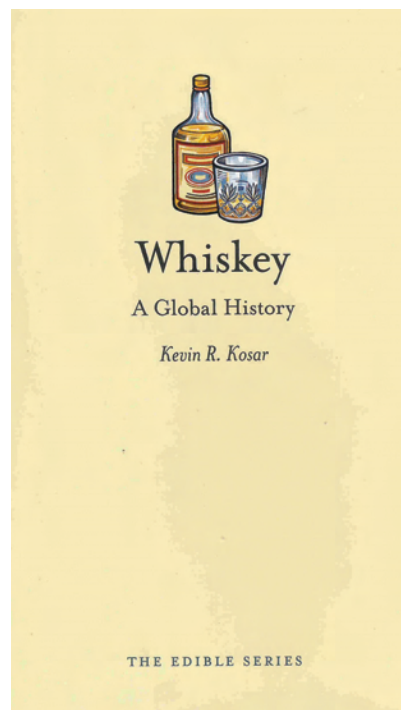
his family, and his marriage. The incident, however, barely causes a ripple in the bureaucratic pond. “[He and his supervisor] craft the memo, couched in enough classified material to guard against its being released while leaving the requisite chutes and ladders open for the downward transference of blame.”

As the stories of the two men unfold, Reuss’s graceful, confident prose reveals their inner torment and the ultimate cost of secrecy. “It doesn’t take a thirty-year career to yearn for clear skies and the resolution of all inner doubts and conflicts,” he writes. “What does take thirty years to understand is how ego-bound all secret-keeping is, that the only difference between keeping and breaking is who will suffer most from the truth. Secrets don’t keep, they putrefy.”

The Washington Post calls “A Geography of Secrets” “a thoughtful, beautifully written novel... with the texture and snap of a modern-day Graham Greene.” Reuss is also the author of “Horace Afoot,” “Henry of Atlantic City,” “The Wasties,” and “Mohr.” To learn more about his research for “A Geography of Secrets” and his thoughts on government secrecy and censorship, see his Sept. 14 article at www.huffingtonpost.com.

Whiskey in the Jar

Kevin R. Kosar has got himself quite a gig. He is the founder of AlcoholReviews.com, where he posts reviews of beers, wines, and spirits that manufacturers send him. For free. So how is this ruse... er, idea, working out for him? Well, it’s not all cakes and ale. “It’s nice to have a fancy single malt arrive



Kevin R. Kosar tells the evolving tale of whiskey from throat-scorching medicine to mellow malt.

to my door unexpectedly,” he admits. “It’s not so great to have the latest watermelon-infused, cognac-based alco-pop show up.”

Not one to cry in his beer, Kosar has now poured his expertise into a new book, “Whiskey: A Global History,” where he shares not only his passion for the potent potable but also his knowledge about its political, economic, and cultural history. After an initial chapter detailing how whiskey is made, Kosar wades into the drink’s contested origins, then moves to Scotland, Ireland and, finally, the United States, all of which have rich histories of distilling – as well as of eluding government-imposed taxes. Farmers in Scotland, for example, avoided the ‘excise men’ by hiding their illegal whiskey in barrels marked ‘sheep dip.’

Lest it all seem too glamorous, Kosar gives, if not equal time, at least a fair hearing to those who through the years have decried the evils of demon whiskey. One such anti-alcohol advocate, a 19th-century Scotsman named George Bell, described what he witnessed in Glasgow’s slums: “From the toothless infant to the toothless old man, the population... drinks whisky. The drunken drama that is enacted Saturday night and Sunday morning beggars description.”

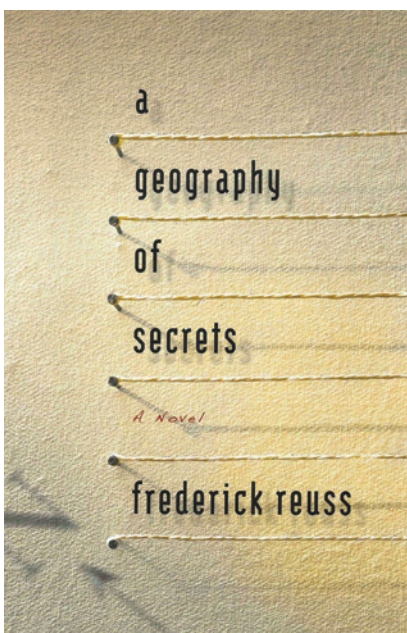
Kosar ends with a look at whiskey in the twenty-first century which, while marketed to the point of giddiness (Jim Beam boxer shorts?), is experiencing something of a back-to-the-roots movement, with micro-distilleries reverting to traditional methods using locally grown, organic grains. As Kosar concludes, “Whiskey drinkers have never had it better.”

Extensively researched at the Library of Congress, where he works, “Whiskey: A Global History” is nicely illustrated with vintage photographs, advertisements, and cartoons, and packed with factoids and stories. For more information, visit www.alcoholreviews.com/whiskey/.

Faded Glory

Take a virtual stroll with author Mark N. Ozer and you’ll discover a wealth of information about the buildings that line one of the most prominent promenades in Washington. You’ll also get a fascinating look behind the facades into the stately mansions and the sometimes less than stately lives of the people who inhabited them.

“Massachusetts Avenue in the



Local writer Frederick Reuss’s new novel deals with the effects of secret-keeping on two mapmakers.