

Blood and Salt

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The central character, Taras Kalyna, has run away from the Austrian army on the brink of World War I, to follow his love, Halya, to Canada. He can't know how hard it will be to find her again or that his search will be interrupted by two years in what some have called "Canada's Gulag." Because Ukrainians come from Austrian-ruled territories, they will be classed as "enemy aliens" and confined behind barbed wire in internment camps. Not every single Ukrainian; the emphasis was on the unemployed, the political (such as union activists), and people who were in somebody's way.

The novel involves class relations. Halya's ambitious father gets her a job as companion to a rich woman, Louisa Shawcross. Louisa is the mother of Ronnie Shawcross, Taras's boss at the small-town brick plant, and he falls in love with Halya. Taras becomes a person in his way. Ronnie denounces him to the police.

By the end of the story, Taras and Halya do come together again. Taras has come to love the southern Saskatchewan landscape and raises horses like the one he saw in a dream as a young man in the old country.

Storytelling is an important element. To explain why he'll never return to the old country, Taras begins a tale – about why he left – which lasts for most of the time in camp and helps to sustain the men's spirits. Another character, Myro, a teacher, tells stories about the great 19th century Ukrainian poet and patriot, Taras Shevchenko. In these stories the narrative moves to the poet's point of view. We see him in St. Petersburg and elsewhere and we learn of his own "internment" – his exile to eastern Russia.

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