

Rabbit Waterloo: On Leona Francombe's Imaginative History

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by **Mary-Catherine Breed**

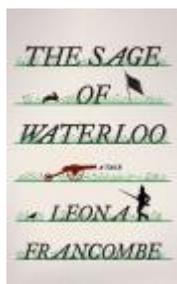
If you're feeling unsure about a rabbit clan's oral history of the Battle of Waterloo, I can't say I blame you. But don't let that stop you from picking up Leona Francombe's *THE SAGE OF WATERLOO*, a subtle, beautiful little novel. I don't say "little" to diminish it at all—quite the opposite, really. Its littleness is its magic. This book whispers its story as you gently nuzzle its fur (and no, you don't feel weird at all about nuzzling fur).

On the grounds of Hougoumont Farm, the rabbit clan dutifully maintains a collective consciousness of the Battle of Waterloo, fought there in 1815. Old Lavender, the wise matriarch of the rabbit colony, instructs younger generations on the generals, troop movements, and geopolitical reasons for the battle. After two hundred years living unnoticed among visitors to the farm, the rabbits have learned a full, detailed history of what occurred there and why. However, more piercing than the historical framework are the accounts of the battle's carnage and depravity. Blood-soaked fields, bullet-riddled barn doors... Old Lavender teaches these realities as well. Her telling takes on the rooted, personal tone of a survivor forever changed by the violence she cannot, and refuses to, forget. William is her protege of sorts, a soul similarly touched by the spirits of the past and compelled to carry on their story. William's perspective guides us through the novel, his soft padded feet ushering us forward in hushed reverie.

Alongside this singular history lesson, the culture of a rabbit family quietly blooms, wafting its scent over the rest of the narrative. There is no flashy fantasy world-building, no dystopian rabbit coup d'état, and the structures of rabbit society never take center stage. Instead, they act as a trellis on which the vines of the narrative creep and curl and hug tight. I'm mixing metaphors, but stay with me. I could smell the earthy fragrance of Old Lavender's flank; I

started to see the world from the perspective of one who looks up from eight inches off the ground. The animal instincts and perception of the rabbits are the perfect vessel through which to explore the spirits of the fallen that still linger on the grounds. The blanket of somber reflection that invades Hougoumont and makes visitors speak in hushed tones finds a voice in William's connection to things unfeeling to we oblivious humans. It's hard to write about *THE SAGE OF WATERLOO*, because I can't sigh in writing. I can't clasp my hands and stare off to the side and take you with me to that place. So please go there, and when you come back, we'll talk about our time there and the nearly unspeakable things we experienced.

Contemplative and earthy, this novel is wholly original and deeply compelling. Elegiac and innocent...there really aren't enough adjectives to describe all that I love about this book. It's a story that breathes with you, that hops ahead and asks you to follow on a grave journey to the core of humanity's darkest hours. Read it, be surrounded by it, sink into its fur, and breathe deep. We must remember, we must carry on, we must stand sentinel for those who were lost and those who remain.



The Sage of Waterloo: A Tale (Hardcover)

by Leona Francombe

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A Brazos Best Pick for June 2015