



Kings of Broken Things

Theodore Wheeler

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With characters depicted in precise detail and wide panorama—a kept-woman’s parlor, a contentious interracial baseball game on the Fourth of July, and the tragic true events of the Omaha Race Riot of 1919—*Kings of Broken Things* reveals the folly of human nature in an era of astonishing ambition.

During the waning days of World War I, three lost souls find themselves adrift in Omaha, Nebraska, at a time of unprecedented nationalism, xenophobia, and political corruption. Adolescent European refugee Karel Miihlstein’s life is transformed after neighborhood boys discover his prodigious natural talent for baseball. Jake Strauss, a young man with a violent past and desperate for a second chance, is drawn into a criminal underworld. Evie Chambers, a kept woman, is trying to make ends meet and looking every which way to escape her cheerless existence.

As wounded soldiers return from the front and black migrant workers move north in search of economic opportunity, the immigrant wards of Omaha become a tinderbox of racial resentment stoked by unscrupulous politicians. Punctuated by an unspeakable act of mob violence, the fates of Karel, Jake, and Evie will become inexorably entangled with the schemes of a ruthless political boss whose will to power knows no bounds.

Written in the tradition of Don DeLillo and Colum McCann, with a great debt to Ralph Ellison, Theodore Wheeler’s debut novel *Kings of Broken Things* is a panoramic view of a city on the brink of implosion during the course of this summer of strife.

Kings of Broken Things Details

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Author : Theodore Wheeler

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From Reader Review Kings of Broken Things for online ebook

Laura Wagner de Romero says

Quite remarkable

I found the King of Broken Things to be a very satisfying and interesting book. Very authentic in the way it captured the voices of many different protagonists. Full of historic details yet never pedantic. Very thought provoking about perennial issues like race relations, discrimination by new and less recent immigrants against others and what is political integrity. I was thrilled by this first novel and look forward to new works by Theodore Wheeler.

Katie B says

Towards the end of World War I, three people with different backgrounds find themselves in Omaha, Nebraska. Karel Miihlstein is a young boy who came to the United States from Austria with his father and three sisters. He soon discovers a love for the game of baseball and some talent to go along with it. Jake Strauss flees to Omaha after a violent incident and starts working for some shady people. Evie Chambers loves to sew and make clothes but that's not exactly how she makes a living. This is a fictional account of what led up to the tragic real-life events of the Omaha Race Riot of 1919.

There's a lot going on in this book which is its strength and weakness. There's racial tension, corruption, prostitution, the refugee experience, etc.. All of these are important subjects that give you an idea of what was going on in Omaha during this time period. Learning about what was happening prior to the race riot really adds to the book's dramatic and horrifying conclusion.

As I mentioned before there is almost too much going on in the book. I think if the book would have been slightly condensed it would have flowed better. I wouldn't eliminate any of the main topics of the book but I think the plot with Karel's ill sister didn't add that much to the story.

While the book might seem to drag in parts, I do recommend reading it because it provides a good history lesson. The ending is so tension filled and dramatic that it's horrifying that this was based on a true life event.

Elizabeth C says

Gripping Historical Read

This book is extremely well written, blending historical facts with storytelling that brings history alive and makes the reader feel as though they are witnessing the events firsthand.

Dana Tuss says

Interesting read. Vivid writing. A time in Omaha's history I really knew nothing about so I loved that part of it and the following the story through an Omaha I know. I had trouble following some of the action -- maybe it was moving too quickly and maybe I wasn't reading that closely because it was the more disturbing parts when I would kind of get lost. I'm not sure I ever really got on board with the main characters. And maybe I wasn't supposed to be on their sides -- they were definitely flawed. Karel especially seemed unreachable -- I didn't understand why he did the things he did.

Kyle says

Most native Omahans with anything like an inkling of interest in history are aware of the race riots and subsequent lynching of Willie Brown and almost the mayor too. Maybe they've had a teach talk about in class, perused the scant wikipedia article or simply saw that plaque somewhere in South Omaha. Theodore Wheeler takes this horrific scar on the famously, milquetoast cow-town's path and builds up to it like a long slow simmer, examine the social attitudes, political jockeying and ethnic shoulder rubbing that lead to the horrific riot that came at the end of World War I.

Following three main characters, a young boy immigrant, a black woman and a farm boy new in town, Wheeler is able to unwrap all the parts of early 20th century life in the sticky city tied to the riverbank. Saloons, baseball fields and worksites come alive in his vivid descriptions, giving you a sense of the sweltering and sweaty life of urban early 20th Century America.

As with any book that has multiple main characters, you'll find yourself tiring of some and wanting to get back to others. I personally found the story of the young Austrian immigrant Karl and his struggle to define himself against his family of sisters and the rugged ideas of masculinity hoisted on him by his new home, to be the most engaging but there was never any point in the book where I wasn't engaged.

And all the different arching stories tie together in the climactic historic event which is portrayed with all the chaotic grandeur it deserves. The finale is a feat in and of itself but the rest of the book leading up to it is still a fiercely well-written piece of Americana that is perfect for fans of E.L. Doctorow and other authors who have used the past to tell us truths about ourselves.

Karna Converse says

Insightful look into life in immigrant neighborhoods of Omaha, Nebraska in the years building up to the Omaha Race Riot of 1919.

Wheeler introduces readers to three main characters who are searching to build new lives during a time of political corruption, growing nationalism, and contentious race relations. Their lives intersect in Omaha's River Ward during a time that soldiers are returning home from war and America is welcoming refugees to her land. The result is both heartwarming and frightening.

My grandparents grew up in Nebraska and were teenagers during this time period. I didn't have the chance to talk to them about the Omaha Race Riots but can see bits and pieces of their attitudes toward Europe, war,

immigrants, and race in Wheeler's characters. Lyrical descriptions, historic detail, and believable characters make this a book I'll continue to recommend to family and friends.

Devin Murphy says

I love when a story grabs me right away and drops me into a world I had no idea I would be fascinated by. This book pulled me into Omaha, Nebraska at the end of WWI, and showed the immense racial, national, and economic strife bubbling up to the surface. The cast of characters are rich, diverse, and compelling. I've happened across some of Wheeler's short stories in literary journals in the past and made a note to watch out for whatever big book he surly had in him, and this does not disappoint. The amazing amount of research that went into the writing of this book was seamlessly incorporated and created a lively, sort of dangerous world on the cusp of great cultural change. The lead up to and execution of the Omaha race riot he portrays feels like one of those prophesized historical moments that if forgotten, repeats itself, and reading this novel against the backdrop of our current news cycles was a profound experience. I loved the writing, the story, and the great reminder that historical fiction is very much a mirror to our daily lives. A great read!

Becky Ford says

This books reminds me of Rilla Askew's 'Fire in Beulah.' The historical events in both books are eerily similar and the fictional stories surrounding these events are heartbreaking. This is an excellent novel, and I look forward to reading more from Wheeler!

Sam Slaughter says

A thoroughly engaging work of historical fiction that manages to blend race relations, baseball, and the corruption that made early 1900s Omaha run. Wheeler's prose is fluid and carries you along from beginning to end.

Carole says

I can only say it was interesting how the story was put together but I can't say that I would tell people they had to read it. I got through it, only because it was written around the history of a riot in 1917 in Omaha, a lynching of a black man helped out by the "machinery" who a corrupt bunch of politicians who had lost the last election. According to this book they helped stir the riot against the mayor who himself had been strung up, but survived. The black man didn't and was put to a terrible death. Did he raped the 18 yr. old white girl? Who knows? He said he didn't. She and her boyfriend the only witnesses and the boyfriend was not a hero. Umm?

Shannon says

I chose this as my Amazon prime book of the month because it sounded so interesting. The premise is great, however the book left a lot to be desired for me. So many of the characters fell flat for me. I feel as though the author created some amazing characters, but just was not able to turn them into dynamic and unique characters. The author's halting sentences disrupted the flow of the book for me, it was difficult to read at times due to odd sentence structure. I feel as though this book was trying to be a classic like *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, highlighting a specific time and place in history with engaging characters and historical significance. Sadly, it was a struggle to read at times.

Suellen says

Before:

I don't remember where I heard about this book. I keep thinking that Simon may have mentioned it on The Readers Podcast. In any event, I'm anxious to read it, especially if Simon was indeed the source. I'm rarely disappointed with his choices.

After:

I like books about immigrants in the early 1900's and this one was very good. It centers around baseball, which I really don't like, but the story was still fascinating. It really wasn't so much about baseball but about all the different ethnic groups coming together to play a game that felt bigger than themselves. The author really pulled me into the story. I really felt like I was there — smelling the smells, hearing the sounds. Unfortunately, this time also included race riots, extreme poverty and, among other things, mob violence. I feel it was a sad but true picture of the time and place. I would definitely recommend this book.

Hollen Wheeler says

DNF. I gave it a month but couldn't get traction or lucidity in the storyline.

Christine Lowe says

Great Book!

What an unexpectedly interesting book. This isn't what I usually choose to read but I wanted to try something different this month. This was a great choice for my Kindle First Pick for July. Although the book is a work of fiction, in the Author's Note Wheeler writes ".... the scenes depicted are a fictional approximation of what life was like in Omaha during the last years of World War 1 and how the Omaha Race Riot of 1919 was experienced." I must confess I didn't even know that Omaha had race riots.

This is an amazing accomplishment for the first time novelist, Theodore Wheeler. I was transported to a time and place that was unknown to me. The characters are extremely well written. There wasn't a false word that made me think this isn't real. This is a time of immigration, political corruption, open prostitution and the doughboys coming home from the war to find their jobs are no longer available. Many of them are amputees

and many more suffering from PTSD, better known then as "shell shock" and are unable to work. The Spanish Influenza was spreading eventually killing fifty million people. One comment regarding the sickness: "A plague like this never would have spread around the globe if it weren't for the war."

This was not a quick easy read. I took my time with it because it gave me a lot to think about. This is a sweeping epic of a book, well written with lots of background regarding the time and place. If you're willing to take the time to read it, this is a great book. This is my idea of a serious book that deserves five stars.

Zara says

American history is not my strong point ...

But I must say I thought this book was about race relations with respect to a baseball game.

And maybe I missed it but, there were some characters made more important than necessary, so I often found myself trying to remember who that person was.

All in all a decent story ... perhaps trying to squeeze too many elements into it - a perception born of ignorance of the real history I suppose.
