



Book Bag:

“Noah’s Raven”

by **Robert T. McMaster**

by Steve Pfarrer

Over the last five years, Williamsburg author Robert T. McMaster has been reimagining part of the Valley’s past in what he calls the “Trolley Series”: historical novels set in and around Westfield and Holyoke and set in the early 20th century.

His first two books, “Trolley Days” and “The Dyeing Room,” were built in part around the friendship of two teenage boys from different sides of the tracks; French-Canadian immigrant Jack Bernard, and Tom Wellington, the son of a wealthy Protestant mill owner.

From the growth of industry in a former agricultural area to the problems workers faced as they tried to unionize, McMaster, a former biology professor from Holyoke Community College, has mined both family stories and news stories from the former Holyoke Daily Transcript to flesh out his novels.

In “Noah’s Raven,” his new book in the series, McMaster continues the story from the early part of 1917. The United States has now entered World War One, and national feeling, egged on by the government, has turned sharply anti-German, with German immigrants facing hostility, discrimination and sometimes violence.

Jack, now a first-year student at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, is having doubts about being in college when other young American men are marching off to war. His friend Tom has enlisted in the navy, but he has concerns of what’s to follow as his ship gets ready to sail.

And Jack’s youngest sister, 13-year-old Claire, is horrified when she arrives for her first days of eighth grade in Holyoke to see her new German-American friend, Sarah Muller, bullied — splattered with red paint — by four male classmates who announce they’re pledged to “resist foreign aliens in our midst.” A few days later, the fiery Claire gets in trouble when she punches a boy who’s harassing another German student. It’s all Marie, her upright older sister, can do to try and talk some sense into Claire that it’s unladylike to fight, even if she sympathizes with Claire’s wish to protect her friends from prejudice. But soon Claire will face an even greater challenge, as she’s accidentally drawn into a genuine plot by a mysterious band of saboteurs to disrupt the U.S. war effort.

McMaster notes that “Noah’s Raven” is set during a time when America “was grappling with its role in the world, defending itself against domestic terrorism, and questioning its own values, a time not so different from today.”