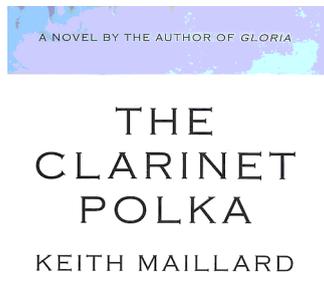

The Clarinet Polka by Keith Maillard (2002), 406 pages.



This "Polish American novel" is set in West Virginia but away from the beautiful mountains and the legendary Shenandoah Valley which led the early pioneers to the "wide Missouri." The fictional town of Raysburg is up north, not too far from Pittsburgh. Actually, it is a rusty place known for its steel industry and modeled after Wheeling, known for its large Polish American population and familiar to the author who spent youthful years here. At present he is teaching in Vancouver, Canada, but the death of two good friends a few years ago served as an impetus to write this story. He is not of Polish descent, but he proved to be a friend, judging by his sympathetic attitude and impressive research. It seems that he read a whole library of ethnic material, consulted legions of friendly proofreaders and, we suspect, listened to hundreds of Polish songs, primarily polkas.



But this is not a novel about "Who Stole My Kiszka" or "Hupaj Siup!" Rather, it is a string of recollections penned by Jimmy after he returns to his hometown from Air Force service in Guam. He is in his late twenties, the time is 1969, and the action covers about four years. His family is a formidable rock on which he can always depend, especially in bad times. It includes his father, a retired steel worker born in the old country, his mother who faithfully follows old traditions and knows the best Polish recipes, and his delightful younger sister Linda, a born organizer and a talented musician. His wide circle of friends constantly offers support, for Jimmy has a serious alcohol problem caused partly by his bad Vietnam War experiences and also by lack of determination regarding the future. This gloomy outlook is deepened by his affair with the married Connie. This sorry affair begins stupidly and ends ingloriously. The realism is stark: in the early period the language is offensively vulgar; soon there is a sense of foreboding.

But things look up when sister Linda introduces her friend Janice, a talented singer and superb clarinet player. Then other girls join and the idea of a girls' band is born, ultimately named the Polka Sisters. The band becomes known for miles around, and Jimmy falls hopelessly in love with Janice, although she is barely sixteen, too young to even hold hands. Her dad is a successful doctor in town, a first class professional and socially prominent, with a tragic past. His pre-war world of privilege in Poland collapsed almost overnight, and most of his family was wiped out. To the author's credit, the war facts cited are completely correct. Despite the passage of years, he is unable to maintain a sunny disposition, and the spontaneous gaiety of the young Poles in town offends him. He fervently wishes that Janice would learn to play Chopin. But the sweet girl falls in love with polkas although, as an adoring daughter, she records every word of dad's reminiscences of old Poland.

There are further interesting developments involving the principal characters. The novel is well written and a real pleasure to read.

George E. Suboczewski
