

Aaron Leonard

The unsettled heavens



Set fair
Weather and war in a fictionalized account of one man's role in the D-Day landings.

Turbulence
Giles Foden
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368pp

It takes a certain audacity to write a novel with a weatherman as its hero. Fortunately, audacity is something that author Giles Foden has in great quantities, so perhaps it is not surprising that the star of Foden's new book *Turbulence* is a meteorologist – albeit one on the trail of a secret weather-predicting technique that could change the course of history.

Like Foden's first novel *The Last King of Scotland*, which featured an imaginary Scottish doctor and the all-too-real exploits of Uganda's murderous dictator Idi Amin, *Turbulence* mixes fact and fiction. As the book begins, it is 1980 and the fictional protagonist, Henry Meadows, is traveling from Antarctica to Saudi Arabia on a ship made of Pykrete, a futuristic-sounding but real amalgam of sawdust and ice that was invented during the Second World War. During his trip, Meadows passes the time by writing in his journal about the events leading up to the 1944 Allied invasion of Europe – the defining episode of his life.

Meadows is a son of imperial Britain, born and raised in the African colonies. In a series of flashbacks to 1944, he tells a story full of humiliation and self-doubt. Some fairly horrible events hit him early on, and to

describe the disorientation this sets loose, Foden gives us the wonderful Swahili word *kizunguzungu* – the spinning dizziness to come. It is a clever touch, as this word neatly captures the trauma swirling around Meadows throughout the story.

In advance of the D-Day invasion, Meadows, a lowly meteorological assistant in the Met Office (closely integrated with the Royal Air Force during the war), is tapped to pursue a reclusive scientist called Wallace Ryman. Loosely based on the actual scientist Lewis Fry Richardson, the character Ryman is a pacifist who developed a theory of weather prediction before the war but who then abandoned these militarily-useful pursuits in favour of something called “peace studies”. Meadows is sent to Ryman's Scottish home on the pretence of monitoring weather conditions. However, his real mission is to befriend Ryman and pry loose the “Ryman number”: a quantity that Foden describes as “a criterion by which the turbulence of weather systems and other flow can be measured”.

The Allies desperately want the Ryman number so that they can predict the weather during the five-day window that they need to make “Operation Overlord” successful. Meadows, too, is passionate about a subject that has become his life's work. At one point – quoting Einstein – he remarks that “before I die, I hope someone will clarify quantum physics for me. After I die, I hope God will explain turbulence to me”. But the weather is not Meadows' only interest, and at times he seems more concerned with smoking too much, drinking too much and fantasizing too much about two members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (who are more of a

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couple together than they will ever be with him). Ryman, for his part, simply wants to be left alone to pursue his peace studies, but Meadows gradually inserts himself into his life.

Anyone with a passing familiarity with contemporary history will be frustrated by the way that Foden makes D-Day seem like the pivotal battle of the war. The Normandy invasion – while significant – was never the mythologized turning point it is made out to be, especially in the context of the far larger war in the East. Foden also stumbles in his relatively uncurious treatment of Ryman's politics. Unlike Meadows, who is given a complex emotional make up, Ryman comes off as cartoonish. Given the prospect of nuclear annihilation that is the Second World War's enduring legacy, Ryman's “peace studies” would seem to merit a bit more of a hearing than Foden offers. Instead, Ryman is dismissed as a man who, though principled, was also absolutely naive to the danger presented by Hitler.

That said, this is a novel, not history. There is something deeply sad in Foden's tale, and this is what makes it more than a run-of-the-mill “science meets war” book. Its narrator is an old man, someone who has lived through both the wonders of what the human imagination can apprehend and the horrors of what it can hand out. The events of Meadows' life are intertwined with a broader study of the pressures asserting themselves in the heavens, much as physics and meteorology are woven into Foden's larger philosophical musings. It can be a fascinating mix; as Meadows/Foden tells us, “There are always scales and dimension that are being ignored. And this is dangerous because the whole point is that all these sizes of turbulence are interconnected; they are both separate and continuous; feeding energy from large to small then back again...they don't last long anyway, these eddies, even if you do spot them. New information yes, but now it's changing, now it's gone – and what have you understood?”

Anyone who reads *Turbulence* like a textbook or journal article will come away quite unsatisfied. The science is there, but like Meadows' Pykrete ship, it is bound up with other substances. Still, this novel with a factual bedrock has a story to tell, and the sharp turns and sudden calamities make for a thoughtful and often wild ride.

Aaron Leonard is a freelance journalist based in New York, US, e-mail leona01@nyu.edu