

MS. MAGAZINE
Winter 2010
THE POSTMISTRESS
By Sarah Blake

assumes, because it deals with war," she wrote. "This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room." She might have enjoyed Sarah Blake's novel, which puts the lie to these stereotypical divisions.

The Postmistress shifts between the small town of Franklin, Mass., and the bomb-blasted capitals of Europe during World War II. Its central characters are Emma Fitch, the fragile bride of Franklin's troubled doctor; Frankie Bard, a fearless, self-described "radio gal," broadcasting from the Blitz alongside Edward R. Murrow; and Iris James, the unmarried postmaster of Franklin. The three make devastating moral decisions to conceal the facts on which the novel hinges—hiding a pregnancy, recording but not broadcasting refugee stories and not delivering a letter. The novel opens decades after the war, though the action takes place over one short year, from the fall of 1940 through summer 1941.

Frankie Bard's broadcasts are the clever device that takes readers from the bomb shelters of London and the turmoil of Paris and Berlin to the quiet shores of Cape Cod. Emma Fitch and Iris James listen to her reports on

the radio, feeling the strife seep into their homes even as their neighbors in Franklin assert the pain will be contained in Europe. Here are the wars and drawing rooms of Woolf's dichotomy, *The Postmistress* dealing as evenhandedly with the agony of Europe's refugee Jews as it does with the suffering of

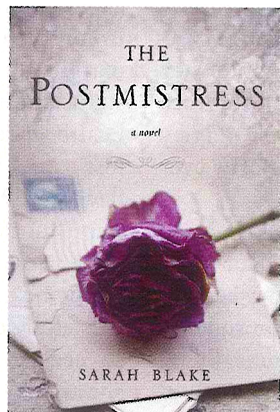
Iris and Emma. An undeniable page-turner (its quick juxtapositions arouse a frenzied reading pace), the novel's strength lies in its main characters. Blake captures Frankie, Emma and Iris in an artfully posed snapshot of Europe at war and America on the verge.

UNDELIVERED

Casey N. Cep

The Postmistress
By Sarah Blake
Amy Einhorn Books

MORE THAN 80 YEARS ago, when Virginia Woolf wrote her essay *A Room of One's Own*, she observed sharp differences between the values of men and women and the sorts of books produced by the two sexes. In life and in fiction, the masculine interest in war and violence always seemed to trump feminine concerns about relationships and people. "This is an important book, the critic



CASEY N CEP is a writer from the Eastern Shore of Maryland.
