ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

Black Diamond Destiny
Helen M. Norris
AuthorHouse
978-1-4817-7271-6
Four Stars (out of Five)

A nineteenth-century Virginia coal mine is the backdrop for this exciting story of greed, fortune, and family.

An axiom, often credited to Balzac, states that behind every great fortune lies a crime. This aptly describes the story captured by Helen M. Norris in her novel *Black Diamond Destiny*. It is a fascinating, sixty-year saga of one family's rise from dirt-poor farmers in pre-Civil War western Virginia to wealthy coal-mine operators in the new state of West Virginia.

Norris chronicles the Mattisons' beginning in 1850, following a family with a small, unproductive farm with a decent coal seam and several sons willing to work. The patriarch, Matt, commits an ugly murder to obtain the money needed to begin mining. He is never prosecuted for his crime, and the family ultimately becomes extraordinarily wealthy and influential. The relationships that form or come apart in the course of the half-decade covered in this book make for a compelling story.

The author, now deceased, appears to have been thoroughly knowledgeable about life in the hills of West Virginia and the workings of the early coal-mine empires that developed there in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Reading *Black Diamond Destiny* is like attending a lecture on the history of coal mining in the Mountain State. What holds this novel together, and makes it such an enjoyable read, is Norris' ability as a storyteller. Her material is said to be partially based on fact. Norris is able to embellish on those facts in order to write the story in a well-paced and engaging fashion.

An eminently believable and readable tale, *Black Diamond Destiny* is the story of the Mattison family. Norris is adept at staying on task and covers extraneous matters and events adroitly. This results in attending to the Civil War in one very short chapter—two-and-a-half pages in length.

This story is unwrapped and well presented to the reader, leaving little to the

imagination, rather than allowing the reader to experience the events as they develop. For example, the author explains that Matt intends to kill the itinerant Abe and steal his money. When Abe says he is leaving, Matt responds: "'Abe,' he said premeditatedly, 'I'm bound up that way myself this mornin'.'"

This tendency to over-explain things sometimes results in rather convoluted sentences. When Gem Mattison decides to extricate herself from the brothel she has run for a long time, Norris writes: "As previously decided, Gem deeded her 'Place' to Jennifer Kerr, the fifty-five year old, warm hearted [sic], but faded harlot, whom she feared had outlived her attractiveness and would someday become a pauper, but who was very capable of managing the property and its occupants, thusly being assured of a home and a livelihood." Thus, Gem's business interests and Jennifer's future are each tied up in a package.

Black Diamond Destiny was published after the manuscript languished in a closet for more than two decades. Readers should find Norris' novel entertaining as well as educational.

John Senger