

Blessed are the Merciful: Our Forgotten Soldiers

Joyce Shaughnessy

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Americans' endless fascination with World War II has spawned innumerable novels and films that romanticize fidelity and patriotism. *Blessed are the Merciful* sets yet another love story amidst the carnage.

While the European campaign occupied many American troops, another battle was being fought on the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines, a bloodbath that ensued after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Unable to send supplies or assistance to the area, the U.S. Army surrendered, leaving those stationed in Bataan under the control of the Japanese. Against the backdrop of the infamous Bataan Death March, author Joyce Shaughnessy's main characters, Elton and Susan, have fallen in love. They experience separation, deprivation, and the atrocities of warfare.

Playing traditional roles, the dedicated soldier and nurse perform their duties under dire circumstances. Since they are committed to each other at the beginning of the story, the conflict that keeps them apart is the war itself. The obvious threat to their happiness is death.

Rather than a relationship interspersed with tender interludes as the cover depicts, this novel is actually a violent, blow-by-blow description of Japanese inflicted physical torture and neglect. Apparent in the telling of the story is an underlying hatred through the eyes of the characters toward a former enemy. Hatred toward the enemy may have been typical at the time of the war, but the reader should be aware that the book is a historical immersion—no restraints, no taboos.

A learning experience it may be, especially for younger readers, but the overall story does not bring to mind blessing or mercy. The cover is misleading (appears to be a romance), and the content is composed of violence and grotesque descriptions, which take precedence over plot and characterization. Reading this novel feels like an act of ghoulish voyeurism. The author's coarse descriptions of POW camp scenes overwhelm the pages with nauseating intensity, as in this example:

Those chosen for burial detail had to be especially careful handling the bodies of those stricken with dry beriberi. The disease was a degenerative condition caused by thiamine deficiency that makes the legs, arms, hands, and testicles swell up. If left untreated, the victim would die in his own pus. The bodies were especially heavy, and if the burial detail wasn't careful, the limbs would burst all over them.

Joyce Shaughnessy lives in Midland, Texas. *Blessed are the Merciful* is her second novel. For those who seek to read in detail about the horrors of war, this novel will not disappoint.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (July 19, 2011)

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