

Blood Creek

Kimberly Collins

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This focused historical novel ably captures a tumultuous period of American history.

Kimberly Collins's impressive historical novel, *Blood Creek*, retells events surrounding the West Virginia coal mine wars through the escapades of an unusual heroine.

The absorbing story opens with a dramatic scene, punctuated by the apprehension associated with Ellie Cline's clandestine affair with Matewan, West Virginia's chief of police; it results in an unexpected pregnancy. Ellie's husband faces off with her lover, leading to two deaths. With her lover gone and her husband facing a life on the run, Ellie has nowhere to go.

Since Ellie always longed for more than her husband could offer, and because she is attracted to the early 1900s high society lifestyle of Charleston, Ellie departs, leaving her daughter behind in Matewan. Meanwhile, there are constant clashes between coal miners and the coal operators determined to silence them. In Charleston, Ellie is caught between her aspirations and her allegiance to her family.

The work incorporates both fictional and historical characters whose roles blend in a congruent manner. While Ellie is based in life, Ellie's sister Jolene and cousin Polly are additions to the record. They stand by Ellie after the scandal; Polly takes care of Ellie's daughter, and Jolene plays a crucial role in fighting for the coal miners' rights.

Local accents keep conversations authentic. They are deployed in a subtle way, with spellings only slightly altered. Accents also help in differentiating between characters of different backgrounds.

The text centers most on characters' emotions and motives. It is a focused story that ably captures features like the gruesome methods used by the coal operators to subdue the miners, including evicting their families. In one such scene, Jolene watches in anger as the men drag a disabled man from his home. The text is ominous and suspenseful even when it focuses on Ellie in Charleston, where she risks being exposed for her role in spying for the miners, and where the possibility that someone from her past will recognize her leads to hair-raising close calls.

Even though the central clash between the miners and the operators is unsolved by the book's end, its other subplots are followed to completion. Ellie gradually develops into a loyal woman, and her relationships with her sister and cousin are central. Their bond becomes greater as the tension heightens.

Kimberly Collins's compelling novel revisits a tumultuous period in American history through a colorful cast of characters.

EDITH WAIRIMU (August 20, 2019)

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