

Bountiful Creek

Steven B. Weissman

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In the spring of 1861, just prior to the onset of the Civil War, eighteen-year-old Martha Somerville finds her life rapidly changing along with the world around her. As she and her loved ones stand on the brink of war, Martha sets about pursuing her dreams and planning her future.

Determined to find a way to build a life with her love, Wilby, Martha focuses her energies on acquiring enough money to buy a plot of land. Her prayers appear to be answered when Elizabeth, a relative who has lived with the family since Martha's infancy, announces her intention to leave Virginia and go home to Ohio to obtain much-needed medical attention. Martha manipulates both Elizabeth and her father into allowing her to go along, in the hope that Elizabeth's wealthy mother, her Aunt Agnes, will finance her future plans. This journey is only the beginning of Martha's adventure. She soon faces many unanticipated challenges, from an unexpected loss to a frightening encounter with a dangerous man, which leaves her fighting for her life and freedom.

Weissman built his plot around the content of actual letters belonging to a woman named Martha Somerville who lived during the Civil War era. Throughout the narrative, Weissman maintains the tense atmosphere of a country on the verge of war and captures the period's style through narrative and character interactions. However, Weissman is less successful in the way he captures the speech patterns of slaves. Much of the dialogue comes across as exaggerated, as when an escaped slave offers to help Martha and Elizabeth repair their buggy: "Ah cain't take no money from ladies nohow, miss. It be mah Christian duty to hep a body in need. Mebbe Ah can fix her good enough to git y'all on your way, at least till you can git da buggy moe prop'ly tended to." While it can be difficult to ascertain the true speech patterns prevalent during certain past eras, the author's choice here proves distracting.

That said, there are few grammatical errors in the text, and characterization is thorough across the board, particularly with the main character of Martha. Far from a flawless heroine, readers will find her either refreshingly independent and strong willed for a woman of her time, or stubborn and self-absorbed. Nearly every action she takes is with her own best interest in mind, from her mercenary reason for accompanying her sick companion to her feeling that "if war was the mechanism to tame Wilby, then as far as [she] was concerned it couldn't start soon enough." This selfishness and occasional cold manner can be viewed as mere immaturity, and the character does experience growth as the novel progresses.

Bountiful Creek is an appealing story with a strong sense of place and time, and Weissman's style is engaging. While some may consider the conclusion vague and unconventional, readers of the romance genre will likely find it satisfying and fitting.

JEANNINE CHARTIER HANSCOM (May 2, 2012)

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