

Following the Eagle

Paulie Jenkins

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The Civil War was a defining moment in the history of the United States, and the effects of the conflict echo in contemporary society. Bookstores still devote plenty of precious shelf space to volumes about those four years, and television and Web sites keep both the general public and history scholars abreast of new discoveries and their repercussions.

Scattered among the nonfiction are novels that manage to make the war real to those of us living 150 years later. The best historical fiction allows its readers to smell the stench of the battlefield, to taste the stained liquid that passed as coffee, to feel the pain of gunshot wounds and the pain of losing a loved one to the fury of the war. Paulie Jenkins' debut novel, *Following the Eagle*, does all this and more.

Ethan Fraser—half-white, half-Sioux—joined the war effort with a strong sense of patriotism; he wanted to fight beside his blue-coated brothers in the name of freedom. However, his loyalties and his dark skin color land him in jail more than once on both sides of the battle lines, and fleeing west to find his mother's people, the Sioux, feels like his only option. Even among people who look like him he finds judgment and accusations; he discovers he must first learn his own true identity before he can find a home.

Jenkins is wonderfully talented at bringing to life the sensual details of a time gone by. She writes, for example, "They continued into town, along sidewalks shaded by ancient, moss-draped oaks, chinaberry and mulberry, and past an Artesian well where water rose from the ground, sparkling like diamonds as it cascaded into a concrete basin. Lettering on windows advertised dry goods, groceries, tailoring, millinery, jewelry, and the services of doctors and lawyers." She uses this same power of observation when describing the cruel torture Ethan suffers; readers may be tempted to glance away during some of the more potent scenes of abuse, a testament to Jenkins' skill as a writer.

The depth of research evident in *Following the Eagle* is very impressive. From snippets of Lakota language to descriptions of obsolete clothing worn by soldiers, Jenkins includes a plethora of details that make the telling of her story feel both authentic and entertaining.

Jenkins has an extended story to tell and may have done better to split the plot into a couple of linked volumes. This novel has nearly six hundred pages, and even with that page count, a few loose ends are left hanging. Family trees and more detailed maps would have been helpful additions to the complex text.

Following the Eagle is a wonderfully entertaining first book from a writer who, hopefully, has more to contribute to the genre of historical fiction.

ANDI DIEHN (June 18, 2010)

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