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CLARION REVIEW ★★☆☆☆ HISTORICAL

From the Ashes of Glory

Howard Goode
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Civil War fiction from a Southern perspective will always find legions of readers among history buffs and battle reenactors. However, such novels risk obscuring the unsavory aspects of Southern culture in favor of continuing reverence for an idealized antebellum era of happy slaves and kind owners, devoid of whipping, branding, and the separation of families. *From the Ashes of Glory* is no exception: No one ever uses the "n" word, freed slaves remain willingly on the plantation, and the true antagonists are the ravaging Union soldiers and carpetbaggers who impoverish good Southern families.

Plantation heir Morgan Montgomery enlists with the Confederacy in 1863. A likable character who always appreciates the cooking of black "servants," he, unfortunately, functions more as a tour guide through a sanitized version of the war than as a character actually experiencing it. Didactic paragraphs inform readers, for example, that Morgan's tent "was located only a few hundred feet from a hospital surgical tent. Surgery…was now being done around the clock. This was the result of the war intensifying as it moved closer to Jackson." Like many of this book's scenes, this one could be brought to life if Morgan, concerned for the dying and wounded, volunteered to work in the hospital tent, conversed with overworked surgeons, or comforted the dying. Missed opportunities abound, preventing both the story and its characters from coming to life.

Sparse, stilted dialogue compounds the problem. Characters speak to inform readers rather than to converse with one another: "We're what's left of a regiment that had been reassigned to General Turner's brigade," says one soldier. "While we were en route to join up with Turner, we got scattered all over the countryside. It was about a week ago when a Yankee division caught us by surprise as we bivouacked along the Tennessee River." Morgan receives this information in silence, and readers are simply told that he is "favorably impressed" to see officers walking so that the wounded can ride.

Morgan suffers physical injuries, cold, and hunger, but he is always saved by friends. His horses are shot out from under him with alarming frequency, a problem he shares with General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the wily tactician who bedeviled Union soldiers and who later became prominent as a Ku Klux Klan member. The author's clear admiration of Forrest and his omission of Forrest's virulent racism suggests that, ideologically, this book is less a Civil War novel than it is a novel about "The War of Northern Aggression." It will find a readership among like-minded white Southerners, but it will not measure up for many other readers.

ELIZABETH BREAU (December 19, 2012)

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