



Jumpin' the Rails!

Sheila W. Slavich

Xlibris (Mar 11, 2016)

Softcover \$19.99 (274pp)

978-1-5144-5395-7

This book combines fantasy and careful research to capture a time that is fading from American memory.

Jumpin' the Rails! by Sheila W. Slavich explores the fluid nature of time as two young boys discover a secret door that leads into the thick of the Civil War, proving that history is always around us. Jumping from modern day America to the time of Lincoln and Lee, this is a fun, fast-paced novel with unexpected twists.

Aleks and Adam have grown up reenacting the Battle of Gettysburg, and know that the War Between the States is more than dry, dusty history. They live near the historic Griggs House, where “scars from the [Yankees’] cannonballs were still visible in the home’s limestone wall.” To their amazement, there’s more to the house than a vivid reminder of the war: a door leads them into the battle they’ve spent years mimicking in costume. Soon they’re embroiled in the conflict in unexpected ways. What started as a game quickly turns serious, and when the friends are separated, it’s clear that there is more at stake than the battle’s outcome.

Slavich has an easy hand with Southern history. Slavery, racism, and the Confederacy are dutifully represented. African-American characters speak in a broad, Southern drawl; the white ones stick to “proper” English. Slavich avoids controversy, however, by keeping the novel’s focus on the two boys. Her descriptions of time travel, in particular, are excellent:

As the compass spun, the wooden boards on the shed wall seemed to turn from wood to dark glass... We dropped from the spinning darkness and landed on board a train—in the 1860s.

Vivid details keep the narrative grounded and make historical details seem more authentic. To flesh out her characters, Slavich uses excerpts from their letters and diaries that offer variety in pacing and tone. She leans heavily on actual historical events, filling in the “what if?” of *Jumpin' the Rails* with a broad brush. The young narrators are the perfect window into history, and provide generous information about real, daily life in the South during the war.

Though it is very detailed, the novel tries to cover too much ground and stretches itself thin in the process. At different times, it seems like a young adult novel, a work of historical fiction, and a steampunk fantasy, and these different threads result in a whole that seems overworked. The book struggles to incorporate contemporary characters and the not-too-recent past in a way that is believable while also clearly distinguishing between the two periods.

Jumpin' the Rails contains much to interest those visiting the South or anyone curious about the complex history of the Civil War, and it combines fantasy and careful research to capture a time that is fading from American memory.

CLAIRE FOSTER (May 23, 2016)

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