



River of Fire

D. L. Cruise

Eric Chase, Illustrator

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Romance thievery familial upheaval murder and religious awakening keep the inhabitants of 1830s' Rochester New York from falling into complacent daily life.

Rachel Abner doesn't intend to fall in love with Michael Dugan a lowly Irish immigrant who labors in her father's mill. Certainly her passion for this stranger is inconvenient considering that she's married and a mother to a young son. Even if she were free Michael is far below her own social class and both her socially conscious mother and wealthy father would take issue with the match. Rachel makes her choice though and embarks on an adulterous journey to satisfy her need for Michael.

Meanwhile Michael faces challenges of his own when the young daughter of his landlord pleads with him to marry her; she's pregnant either by a neighbor man or by the preacher who's been using her as a sexual slave. She sees kind Michael as her only means of survival and when he refuses out of love for Rachel he sets in motion a series of events with a violent tragic ending.

Surrounded by characters representing various aspects of human behavior—Tilly Rachel's faithful black servant; Terrance Beale the corrupt preacher; Hilary the self-centered rich woman—Rachel and Michael ride the tide of Rochester's growth from a small mill town into an epicenter of social political and religious upheaval.

Cruise maintains an exuberant pace. The characters in this novel scream pound growl strike pulsate and press to various tragic and triumphant ends. The sex scenes whether of the tender or violent type are engaging without being overly graphic and manage to fit well in the setting of a small town in which everyone knows everyone else's business. Religion weighs on the minds of most of the characters and Cruise succeeds at examining the different ways that faith can affect the actions of people.

Occasionally the historic background feels pedantic against the roiling action of the novel. Cruise's attempts to tie the two elements together do not quite succeed. She writes in the introduction "Through the fictional characters of my book I dramatize vividly the transformation of human beings representing every facet of 1830 American life." In a few cases such as with Tilly and Hilary this goal results in familiar stereotypes which fail to transcend their worn identities.

Cruise names a few of the issues of the day such as anti-slavery and the women's movement which had origins in Rochester but there's no evidence of these movements in the novel. Women and black characters operate on the fringes of society while white males control the money but in the end nothing changes; Rachel and Michael are only allowed escape and that only after an overabundance of deaths have occurred.

Despite a tenuous historical link and occasional over-the-top action *River of Fire* is well crafted and offers a few hours' escape. The novel may not succeed in fulfilling the author's goal of historical example but it is a rousing read.

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