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The Ambush of My Name

Jeffrey Marks
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In 1865, after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth and his co-conspirators were captured, tried, and executed. Of course, such a conspiracy, created by a civil war, would not die so easily. Ulysses S. Grant, the main character in this mystery novel, returns to his boyhood town of Georgetown, Ohio not only to visit family, but to try to get a sense of whether or not he will have the necessary support for a future run for the presidency. A hero in the north, a villain in the south, what will he be in his hometown and the other villages and towns along the border of the war? How will he be received?

Not well, it seems. An angry crowd meets him and his wife Julia upon their arrival, and, worse, a dead body turns up in their hotel room. With the aid of a naive but ambitious reporter and a Pinkerton agent sent along by the President, General Grant sets about to solve the murder of the stranger in his bed. The tensions increase when a former flame arrives in town at the same time, someone attempts to poison Grant, and, later, shots are fired at him. These are all mixed in with Grant's attempts to schmooze with the local politicos and deal with such childhood ghosts as a favored schoolteacher with ties to the conspirators and a boyhood bully who supported the Confederates.

Marks, a talented writer, carefully sketches in period detail without overwhelming the reader, concentrating on observing the era and the city of Georgetown through Grant's eyes. The novel starts out reasonably well and continues to gain texture and heft as it moves along. Moreover, Marks's portrayal of Grant paints him as a human being with strengths and weaknesses, a man knowledgeable and confident on the battlefield, but timid and intimidated when confronting an old girlfriend or the wrath of his wife. One of this novel's great strengths is its ability to intrigue and tease the reader about the post-Civil War period, inspiring a closer look at the history—and conspiracies—of the era. For the fan of historical mysteries, this is a terrific addition to the genre.
MARK TERRY (July / August 2001)

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