

The Deep Cut

Susan Rosson Spain

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This tale of bravery and heartache takes place during the Civil War. The “cut” of the title refers to the railroad gorge that runs the rocky hills between Winfrey and Culpeper, Virginia. Yet it could also symbolize the rift between South and North and between the thirteen-year-old narrator Alonzo, nicknamed Lonzo, and his Papa. Lonzo is “slow-witted” and feels he is a disappointment to his storekeeper father. As he recounts his experiences of helping his widowed Aunt Mariah run her inn in Winfrey from April 1861 to 1864, Lonzo gains wisdom, confidence, and self-respect, proving his courage in an unexpected way at the novel’s climax.

The author was eight years old when she first heard the family story that forms the basis of this approachable and historically accurate debut novel. Her ear for Southern speech is excellent, as is her understanding of her young, learning-disabled narrator.

Despite writing for a young audience, Spain does not ignore the complexity of war: she presents “good” and “bad” soldiers among the Confederates and Yankees. Neither does she ignore the tragedy of despair and death, but she does show, through Lonzo, how adversity can make a person stronger. Near the end of the tale, he ponders the nature of the conflict: “Real things was never easy as a feller wanted ‘em to be. Confederates was like Ferdy [his cousin], stubborn, and the Yankees was mostly bloodthirsty. And everybody was sure they was right.” In the end, Lonzo’s humanity overrules his allegiance to any political faction.

With its balanced and interesting treatment of the Civil War, *The Deep Cut* stands out among juvenile titles on this subject, making it a worthy addition to any middle-school fiction collection.

JEANNE M. LESINSKI (February 8, 2007)

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