

The Gates of Sheol: A Civil War Novel (The Shiloh Trilogy Book 3)

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This historically attentive narrative keeps its pace, resulting in a memorable, fierce novel with a strong Christian message.

War is hell. As young Sergeant Stanley Mitchell discovers as he passes through the gates of the Confederate prisons, it is deadly, dull, grey, and miserable too. *The Gates of Sheol* is a graphic, historically accurate novel about the grueling life of a prisoner during the final years of the Civil War.

When Stanley is taken prisoner by the Confederates, he knows that his only goal must be to keep his head down and survive until peace is achieved. Sustained by letters from his sweetheart, Stanley clings to a fragile faith that he will finally return to normal civilian life.

Stanley grapples with his faith through unimaginable circumstances. While he is incarcerated, Stanley finds comfort and community among the other Christian prisoners. Their prayer meetings, shared rituals, and reliance on the scriptures' messages gives Stanley the strength he needs to endure biblical trials—starvation, fear, and illness among them. God is shown to be a source of sustenance who makes all hardships worth enduring. There are some moments that seem anachronistic in the expression of characters' beliefs, however.

Rather than devolving into a neatly packaged spiritual message, the novel describes a faith that adapts to difficult conditions instead of simply making good on Stanley's wishes and prayers. With smart parallels to the book of Job and the trial of Daniel in the lions' den, *The Gates of Sheol* is a Civil War parable.

This is the final book in the Shiloh trilogy. It is painfully realistic and rich in description. Every detail is included, from the buttons on Stanley's coat to the maggot-covered corpses that have to be removed from scenes. At the same time, there are beautiful moments as well, as when Stanley and the other prisoners undertake "the fine, laborious magic of making pine pitch glue."

Letters from Stanley's sweetheart Anna ease intense, grim scenes of prison life. Alternating chapters help flesh out the novel and provide historical background, with chapter leads that mention events like Sherman's march south to help orient Stanley in time so he doesn't seem to drift endlessly from prison to prison.

The Gates of Sheol is a satisfying finish to the Shiloh trilogy. It is a historically attentive narrative that keeps its pace—a memorable, fierce novel with a strong Christian message.

CLAIRE FOSTER (February 7, 2018)

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