



The Odyssey of Danny Helm: The Saga of Danny Helm, Volume One

Hill DeMent

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It is the eve of the Civil War and Danny Helm's life is pretty miserable. He slops pigs seven days a week on his father's failing farm in the Ozarks between humiliating beatings from a sadistic older brother. His mother is dead from overwork. Thankfully the tormentor lights out for the gold mines of California absconding with overdue mortgage payments. Danny and Dan Sr. must find new digs. They aim to regroup near Sacramento but Danny is stranded near Santa Fe in New Mexico Territory while his father continues west alone.

The setback morphs into a huge positive. Circumstance allows Danny to lay claim to a working ranch. Three young women target him with matrimonial offensives. When Mexican banditos shoot up a unit of U.S. Cavalry Danny makes the fateful decision to consult a medical textbook and start cutting out bullets and cauterizing with a glowing fire poker. He fears a fatal mistake but as the territorial Army commander puts it each person must ask themselves "...which would I regret the most what I did or what I couldn't?"

From that day forward he's known as Doctor Helm never mind the nature of the medical training; gratitude and respect well up all around. Close alliances are cemented with the army and with Indians from the Tesuque Pueblo tribe who make him a tribal member a la *Dances With Wolves*. No matter how Danny rises in the world he prefers to downplay growing renown. "So I save a life or two so what? I haven't got time to sit around here arguing with you about what a great hero people think I am."

Here is an honorable young man who isn't a genius but is an exceptional learner. He eschews premarital relations deterred by his parents' pregnancy-sparked adolescent marriage. An opponent of bullying behavior Danny defuses volatile situations with reason and good will when violence is avoidable.

Readers who wish to be surprised by story developments are advised to skip the complete synopsis on the first page which neutralizes dramatic tension. A more minor irritant is a definite tick in the temporal element. The primary action takes place over the course of about two years but each time Danny's age is mentioned he's a year older. Eighteen seems like the best age for the characterization the transitional cusp of manhood.

Hill DeMent's style is unadorned approachable. Fun country sayings liven up the text like: "I feel like I could eat the north end of a southbound skunk." He spins this yarn with a historical component in it. His four other novels include the speculative *The Ice Age Is Coming!* Keep an eye out for this book's sequel *The Epic of Danny Helm*. *The Odyssey of Danny Helm* is decent fare for adults but best for middle teens.

TODD MERCER (November 5, 2007)

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