

The Reluctant Patriot: A Novel Based on a True Story of the Civil War in Tennessee

Susan Lohafer

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In the historical novel The Reluctant Patriot, flawed individuals strive to stay true to their values after war disrupts their lives.

In Susan Lohafer's poignant historical novel *The Reluctant Patriot*, a father is accused of sabotage as the nation threatens to shatter under the strain of war.

The American Civil War has begun in earnest. Still, Harrison Self—a Union supporter and a farmer in Eastern Tennessee—believes it to be a minor political squabble that will soon resolve itself. Then Harrison's eager son participates in a raid against the Confederacy. Harrison, not wanting to lose his son, tells him to hide out and avoid capture. For this, Harrison is arrested and sentenced as a traitor. He leaves his wife and young family alone in tumultuous times. During his time in a hellish nearby prison, Harrison wages his own kind of war, hoping to save his family, himself, and the soul of his beloved nation.

Against the backdrop of the war, the book focuses on individual experiences most, backtracking to include multiple characters' viewpoints on individual events. Because of this, Harrison's time in prison is considered not just through his perspective, but through those of his daughters and fellow prisoners. Even as Harrison and his family endure angst and heartbreak, Harrison remains steadfast in his values, and his empathy makes him fascinating.

Secondary characters are present more to round out the time period. They include Harrison's naïve daughter, Lizzie, and Parson Brownlow, whose personality is larger than life. Their voices are distinguished ably in the text: Lizzie's diary, which is represented by handwritten pages showing errors, scratched out passages, and incorrect information, rambles; Parson Brownlow, in contrast, is verbose and grandiose. Characters' conversations also layer in social and political commentary, though some such conversations are compressed into dense passages that inhibit the book's flow. Joshua stands out from the rest of the supporting cast: he's a slave and a child, and his understandings of the war, and of the people who have power over him, are at once that of a young person and wise.

Sensory details bring scenes to life, as when Lizzie's country clothes become soiled as she traverses a town, and with the shared, vile conditions that Harrison endures in prison. All reveal how the Civil War impacted small communities. The book's lengthy epilogue shares historical information to round out the book.

Though the Civil War's outcomes are a given, Harrison's own fate is in question prior to the book's powerful resolution. In the historical novel *The Reluctant Patriot*, flawed individuals strive to stay true to their values after war disrupts their lives.

JOHN M. MURRAY (October 26, 2020)

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