ForeWord Reviews

HISTORICAL

The Spur & the Sash
Robert Grede
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Arching elms line a plantation road; a gentleman farmer offers cigars and pours brandy; a lady in rich velvet nods at the Yankee officer sent to protect them. These romantic images fill Robert Grede's debut novel. Yet this story also encompasses the brutality of death, disease, and hunger; the fighting and maiming of both the Union and Confederate armies; and the defeated spirit of the American South. *The Spur & the Sash* is the result of thorough research, which mined family lore, journals, letters, and official documents for details about the end of the Civil War and the first days of Reconstruction. The novel is based on the captivating story of a real person, the author's great-great-grandfather, George Van Norman, a Union officer who falls in love with a plantation owner's daughter.

The tale opens on July 31, 1865, with Sergeant Van Norman on a southbound train on his way to be mustered out of the victorious Union Army. The real protagonist encounters several fictional characters: fellow soldiers in his regiment; army deserters, both Union and Secessionist; a rebel prisoner of war who becomes Van Norman's friend; thieves; and murderers. Women, who share the horror of war, wait, grieve for the dead, and take care of their returning men.

A prominent theme is the new freedom of the Negro people, released from servitude and allowed to marry, to learn reading and writing, and to own property. They also face difficulties: they are displaced, without homes or the skills they need to become productive citizens.

This fast-paced historical work brims with the violence of war, but it also soars with glorious, descriptive prose when describing the weather or the rural Southern landscape. As war forces change on the book's characters, each one's passion for fighting morphs into treachery, lawlessness, or bravery in the face of defeat. The romance between the fair-minded Van Norman and the Confederate daughter is told with equal measures of tenderness and realism.

Robert Grede is a successful businessman and the author of two best-selling marketing books, who has served on the faculties of two major universities. His meticulous research, attention to detail, and beautiful use of language have created a historically accurate and

delightful story, which makes this a standout book. Both seasoned literary readers and those looking for a pleasurable escape into a love and war story will be satisfied, and will no doubt anticipate another novel from this talented writer.

Mary Popham