



This Side of the River

Jeffrey Stayton

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With humor and a group of women characters bursting with toughness and personality, this historical novel is both bizarre and compelling.

Jeffrey Stayton's *This Side of the River* is a book unlike any other you are likely to encounter this year; it's an offbeat story presenting a unique take on Confederate war widows and their desire for revenge.

The story is told from rapidly shifting perspectives. It is 1865, and the Civil War has just ended—theoretically. But for a select group of Southern women, the war is just beginning. Goaded on by their leader, a curious young man named Cat Harvey, a group of war widows with nothing left to lose decide to ride north from Georgia to General William Tecumseh Sherman's house to burn it down in retribution for their husbands' military deaths.

The names of the female characters are as unique as their stories. All of them, from Darkish Llewellyn to Vella Morton, Rainy Greer, Absalom Canady, and Cornelius Cogdell Dudley, weigh in with their perspectives on why they feel they must make the journey. And the women portrayed are no ordinary women. They're as tough as nails and are willing to risk their own lives in the name of revenge.

The women band together, riding horses by day and hunkering down in makeshift camps by night. Throughout their journey, they forge alliances and encounter adversaries. There are liaisons, rapes, pillaging, lying, cheating. In general, nothing much good happens.

Cat is an outlandish character who seems to be living with multiple personalities due to trauma sustained during the war. Although he is the group's leader, he is also responsible for many of the loathsome things going on during the odyssey to Sherman's home.

Despite the bleak atmosphere in which the story takes place and the revenge premise, the novel is not without its humor. For example, each war widow believes herself to be responsible for shooting Cat Harvey in the arm, which, after several chapters, is pretty amusing.

To attain full enjoyment of this book, the reader must definitely suspend disbelief and simply go along for the quirky ride within the alternate universe Stayton has created.

HILARY DANINHIRSCH (Spring 2015)

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