



Voices in the Dead House: The American Novels

Norman Lock

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The horror and devastation of the Civil War are witnessed by two icons of American literature in Norman Lock's novel *Voices in the Dead House*.

After the 1862 defeat of the Union Army, Washington is overwhelmed by a flood of wounded and dying men. Walt Whitman and Louisa May Alcott, confronted by this hellish scene, are determined to be of service. Although the two did not know each other—Whitman volunteered at Armory Square Hospital as a sanctioned visitor and wound dresser; Alcott was a nurse at Union Hospital—the book depicts them as aware of each other's presence. Alcott, cognizant of the good and the ill of Whitman's poetry and his reputation, declares herself unimpressed by either.

To capture the writers' voices, the book leans on their own preserved words. Alcott's recollections of time she spent with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are reminders of saner, happier days. On paper, she is an intense, independent abolitionist and suffragist with a discerning intellect, spry wit, and humor. And Whitman's writings reveal him as both compassionate and egocentric. But he loves men, and he has the ability to see beyond the constraints of religion and find what's spiritual in each human being. Still, though he's a staunch supporter of democracy, his conflicted views on abolition are surprising.

The book's cameo appearances by luminaries including President Abraham Lincoln (seen sitting up half the night wrapped in his old shawl) are moving and humane, contrasting with the harsh realities of the postwar period. They help to make *Voices in the Dead House* a stunning historical novel that brings history and literature together to share a singular perspective on the Civil War.

KRISTINE MORRIS (July / August 2022)

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