ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

HISTORICAL

Where They Bury You
Steven W. Kohlhagen
Vicki Ahl, designer
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Sunstone Press
978-0-86534-936-0
Five Stars (out of Five)

Heroes fall in a fictionalized account of how the West was swindled.

With *Where They Bury You*, Steven W. Kohlhagen inserts a "what-could-have-been" amendment to the official American story of the Southwest in the 1860s.

Kohlhagen's research uncovered a contradiction in characterizations of a US Army officer who was killed near Apache Pass in Arizona in 1863. Hampton Sides reports in his esteemed 2007 book, *Blood and Thunder*, that Joseph Cummings' death was a murder by a "concealed Indian." Other sources suggest that Cummings, who at his death was in possession of a large, unexplained amount of cash, was not a "brave and lamented" hero as described by the frontiersman Kit Carson. This discrepancy is at the heart of Kohlhagen's story.

Kohlhagen's first novel is an engaging slant on the past. The "little story"—he borrows the term from Bernard Cornwell in his epilogue—is a scam engendered by a handful of con artists and card sharks, among them Joseph Cummings. At the dramatic center of this group are Lily Smoot, a Santa Fe poker dealer and sometime whore, and her lover, Auggie Damours, an endearing hustler who left the California gold rush "with less gold than he came in with."

Lily's dream is to own a ranch in the Washington Territory, and she thinks Auggie is cagey yet trustworthy enough to help her and perhaps share in her dream. The swindle involves bilking a fledgling volunteer US Army's payroll by selling, stealing, and reselling arms and equipment. And if the Confederates win the impending Civil War, the Rebel Army will be just as easy a mark.

The "big story" in this sweeping historical novel is the settling of the New Mexico and Arizona Territories by the "white-eyes," the systematic displacement of Apache, Ute, and

Navajo tribes from their ancestral lands, and the on-and-off hostilities among Native Americans, American settlers, the US Army, and Mexicans. And if this story weren't big enough, the Civil War is coming—the Texas Volunteers are working their way up the Rio Grande in an effort to win new lands for the Confederacy.

Kohlhagen covers the two major Civil War battles that were fought in New Mexico. He also brings such notable historical characters as Cochise, Geronimo, Kit Carson, Major Edward Canby, Colonel James Carleton, and many others into the story, including the surprising but wholly plausible appearance of the actor John Wilkes Booth, for whom Auggie, with his drooping mustache, is said to be a dead ringer.

Kohlhagen adeptly weaves fiction and fact, bringing to life the little stories that comprise the big story.

Joe Taylor