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Review

SONG OF HIWASSEE

The Serpent of Rebellion' re-emerges in this Reconstruction novel

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Price, Charles F. *Freedom's Altar*. John F. Blair, ISBN 895871777

Charles Price catapulted to the attention of Civil War readers three years ago with *Hiwassee*, an unusually well-received first novel that is based on the wartime experiences of his Southern Appalachian forebears and buttressed by an authenticating mastery of such documentary sources as editor Walter Clark's 1901 *North Carolina Regiments, 1861-1865*, plus the mammoth *North Carolina Troops, 1861-1865*, a series edited by Weyland T. Jordan, Jr., of that state's archives and history division.

In fact those readers were so enthralled by *Hiwassee* that it earned Price, a former Washington lobbyist for the aviation industry, the reputation of a spellbinder in the realm of Civil War fiction. Happily, the reading pleasures crafted into **Freedom's Altar** both confirm and deepen that reputation. And for those left longing for a sequel at *Hiwassee's* end, yes, the new novel is just that.

It's not a Civil War novel as such, however, since this time the assured storyteller's time frame is the era immediately following the war. During this time western Carolina and north Georgia -- the mountainous terrain of the war's mayhem-wreaking Bushwhackers -- were perhaps even more treacherous as Unionists, "secesh," and the region's comparatively few ex-slaves grappled with how to accommodate themselves to a totally rearranged world that few had any experience, and indeed, often any inclination, to face.

Nevertheless *Hiwassee's* successor is again centered by Madison Curtis, the aristocratic, meticulously honorable paterfamilias of a once affluent clan, and Oliver Price, a yeoman shoemaker from the Georgia hills who left behind a devoted wife and young son to valiantly acquit himself at Vicksburg and elsewhere across the South in "a rich man's war, a poor man's fight."

A longer, more complex novel, **Freedom's Altar** expands its cast of central characters to include another diverse, memorable pair. By name these are Nahum Bellamy, a Radical Republican apostle (with a darkly shadowed war record) and demagogic Freedmen's Bureau "Boss," who is singularly driven by a lust to avenge Curtis's class of Southerners by any means necessary, including murder, and Daniel McFee, a recently returned Union soldier affectionately known to Judge Curtis as "Black Gamaliel" when master and slave worked side-by-side on plantation tasks in antebellum times.

Postwar, McFee sharecrops on a small farm portioned off from the wrecked plantation by his former owner. Andy, the oldest of three Curtis sons, is the sole survivor among them of the Confederacy's defense. He is compelled by fate to abandon his family-pet softness for a take-charge role (in tandem with Oliver Price, a friend from the war) when Bellamy, initially idolized by McFee, begins to press a legal claim against the judge by an illiterate mother-daughter duo of white mountaineer squatters. **Freedom's Altar** introduces Hamby, the runaway mulatto son (by a previous master's scion) of McFee's late and greatly beloved wife, now back in the mountains as a Bellamy toady and rider in his Seraphim posse of "police."

So in part this gripping, hard-to-put-down novel is about father-son and other male relationships. But despite the friendship that McFee and the judge rebuild and strengthen, overarchingly this novel is about tragically squandered opportunities to begin the process of racial reconciliation in the war's embittered aftermath.

"When the war ended," McFee realizes as he begins to perceive Bellamy's actual intent, "the Rebels all seemed to admit their guilt and bend their necks to the all-conquering Union. . . . But as the months passed and the lenient terms of the peace sank in, they began to see that nearly all whites North and South shared the same dread of black folk and so shared an interest in keeping them down. Thus the serpent of rebellion once more raised its head, and the Rebels began to dream again their evil dreams of white supremacy and the oppression of the Negro."

And near the elegiac sequel's close, the senior Curtis agonizes, "Extreme opinion has carried the day on all sides, I'm afraid," adding, "I see nothing ahead of us now but division and hate. . . . I fear the two races can never be reconciled

but instead will be forever at odds. And the pity of it is that we might have averted it, had we only been men of better character."

Such insights, of course, are unlikely to endear **Freedom's Altar** to "lost cause" romanticists, even if its phonetically rendered dialogue often lapses closer to Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* than, say, Charles Frazier's more recent *Cold Mountain*, a novel similarly set in time and place to Price's continuation. But don't be deterred by these perhaps persnickety comparisons. To be sure, Price's stellar creation is to be relished for its own beauties of prose. Indeed, the unforgettable final scene pierces the heart.

Bob Summer is Southern correspondent for Publishers Weekly and president of the Southern Book Critics Circle. He lives in Nashville.