

After Midnight: Buried Treasure And Social Squabbles In Georgia's Low Country

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Review

AFTER MIDNIGHT

Buried treasure and social squabbles in Georgia's Low Country

Groom, Winston

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Harris Jr., William C. *Delirium of the Brave: A Novel of Savannah*. St. Martin's Press, ISBN 312254954

Readers who expect a Civil War story in **Delirium of the Brave** will be disappointed. The Civil War is just a gimmick used by William C. Harris, Jr. to set up his saga of several Savannah, Georgia, families from Civil War times till the present. It begins with a prologue in which the "Grand Dragon of the Invisible Empire" watches a boat load of strangers land on a small island in the marshes of the Georgia coast. Later, the "Grand Dragon" and his "klavern" turn out to be a herd of feral pigs that is personified (the way that animals are in fairy tales) so they can worry about such things as their "gene pools" and "the big thunder" of human's guns.

The story begins at the shank end of the Civil War as a young Confederate officer, Captain Patrick Driscoll, and his slave, Shadrack Bryan, prepare to defend Savannah from ravaging Union gunboats with a large cannon at Battery Jasper on Raccoon Island. Captain Driscoll's family has given him a chest with the family treasure to hide on the island. Shortly afterward, the Confederate cannon blows up and kills Driscoll. Moments later, a shell from the Union gunboat kills Shadrack too, so that the location of the buried treasure is lost.

From here, the author begins a long and frequently distracting saga of several Savannah families as they wend their way into the 20th century and end up in the 1990s still looking for the treasure. I say distracting because of the strange and confusing passages of explication that accompany the story and often throw the reader out of time or place and that sometimes read like a travel guide for the city of Savannah.

For instance, when the author is describing an automobile of the 1930s, we are given this information: "Even the name of Mr. Packard's machine, the Dual Cowled Ph'ton, suggested some awesome monster from Greek Mythology. Ph'ton, indeed, was a son of the Greek god Helios, who drove his father's sun-chariot wildly through the sky until he lost control and was struck down by a thunderbolt from Zeus as punishment." In fiction, if you must refer to the classics or to the Bible, it is customary to assume your reader will get the drift when you allude to a character such as, say, Job -- or, for that matter, Ph'ton -- without burdening him with the entire story.

As the saga continues, we meet the O'Boyle family, who are corrupt and mean-spirited Irish politicians, and the upstanding Hartman family, newcomers to Savannah who are repeatedly done in by the O'Boyles. The elder O'Boyle committed a heinous crime in the 1950s, which comes back to haunt him and his son in the end.

The bulk of the story entails the trials and tribulations of the younger Hartman, John-Morgan, and the younger O'Boyle, Tony, beginning in the early 1960s when they attend a Catholic military school in Savannah. Catholicism, in fact, plays a large role in **Delirium of the Brave**. All the principal characters are Irish Catholic except for "Bubba" Silverman, who is Jewish but also attends the Catholic school, and Lloyd Bryan, who is Catholic but not Irish.

Young Hartman and O'Boyle develop a hatred of one another early on in school when a fight develops over a girl, and the antipathy intensifies as the years pass by. Hartman and his friend Mike Sullivan join the Marines and go to Vietnam. O'Boyle goes too, later becoming a Navy SEAL.

While Hartman and Sullivan are in Vietnam, Hartman's long-range patrol becomes involved in a fierce firefight in which Hartman calls in artillery fire from a firebase "almost thirty miles away." (Never mind that the biggest Marine field artillery weapons in Vietnam had an effective range of only about half that distance. I point out this factual error because, while it may seem like nitpicking -- and all writers, including me, make them from time to time -- factual errors damage the credibility of everything else the author writes.)

Much time in the story is now skipped over to "cut to the chase." Twenty-five years later, Hartman is a doctor in Savannah. Mean-spirited Tony O'Boyle is a lawyer running for governor, Lloyd Bryan has given up pro football

for the priesthood, rough and tumble Mike Sullivan is a contractor, and Bubba Silverman sells stocks in Atlanta. They all decide to meet back in Savannah for the traditional St. Patrick's Day parade, and the story reaches its conclusion in a resumed hunt for the buried treasure, the discovery of a skeleton, and the solution of mysteries of many, many years.

What strikes this reader is that so many of the events this tale turns upon seem to be contrived and unlikely coincidences, as if the author first wrote the scene, then somehow had to justify it. Coupled with the overblown explication and factual errors pointed out above, the book is uneven to the point of being jerky. The author had the elements of a good story, but it is clear that what this book needed most was a good editor.

Winston Groom is the author of 13 books, including Forrest Gump and Shrouds of Glory, a history of the Battle of Nashville. He will have two books published this year: a history of football at the University of Alabama and El Paso, a novel set in northern Mexico in 1915-16.