

The Unquiet Memory: A Gothic Depiction Of One Veteran's Elusive Peace

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Review

THE UNQUIET MEMORY

A gothic depiction of one veteran's elusive peace

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Fall 1999

O'Nan, Stewart *A Prayer for the Dying: A Novel*. Henry Holt, ISBN 805061479

With **A Prayer for the Dying**, Stewart O'Nan, author of five previous books, lives up to his billing in the literary magazine *Granta* as one of the best young American novelists. Known for his versatility, depth, and originality, O'Nan ventures into the nineteenth century for the first time and uses the second person to narrate a tale of one man's struggle to save his town from a pestilence of biblical proportions.

Set six years after the War ends, **A Prayer for the Dying** is not a conventional Civil War or Reconstruction novel; rather, it is a Civil War novel in the sense that *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is a World War II movie-in both stories wartime experiences fundamentally alter a veteran's outlook on life. The main character of the book is Jacob Hansen, who pulls triple-duty as the sheriff, undertaker, and pastor of Friendship, Wisconsin. As such, he has taken on the responsibility of counseling the townspeople from the pulpit, scolding and punishing them when they stray and preparing their bodies when they die. All the while, he is haunted by memories of the War.

Indeed, the War invades every facet of Hansen's life, influencing everything from how he trims his beard (he follows the fashion of his regiment's captain) to what transportation he takes (he feels compelled to use bicycles and railway handcars for transportation because the gruesome wartime experience of taking shelter inside the carcass of his horse to survive a Rebel siege has produced an inescapable repugnance for horses).

In the first chapter, O'Nan masterfully uses Hansen's trip to investigate a report of a dead man on a farmer's property and the thoughts running through Hansen's mind to introduce the town and the cast of characters, while

foreshadowing all that is yet to come. When the doctor concludes that diphtheria caused the man's death, Hansen places his responsibility to the town above all else. Even though the disease spreads rapidly, he hesitates to implement a full quarantine and convinces his wife to remain, rather than flee to a safe distance with their newborn daughter, because he does not want to induce a panic. As the death toll rises and an unstoppable wildfire looms in the distance, the pressure on Hansen builds to a level both mentally and emotionally unbearable, leading to a final staggering revelation.

A Prayer for the Dying is a Midwestern gothic that unmercifully explores how much emotional pain and suffering one man can endure, and, if he survives, the cost to his sanity and his faith. In short, Stewart O'Nan has combined the depth of Camus and Faulkner with the pure readability of Stephen King to produce an exceedingly literate and satisfying page-turner all his own.

Thomas Hill received an M.A. in history from Oklahoma State University and is currently working toward an M.F.A. in writing at the University of Memphis.