

### The Masterless: Joining Bushwhackers, A Teenage Boy Abandons His Humanity

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## Review

### THE MASTERLESS

#### Joining bushwhackers, a teenage boy abandons his humanity

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**McColley, Kevin** *The Other Side: A Novel of the Civil War*. Simon and Schuster, ISBN 684857626

Observing Adolf Eichmann in a Jerusalem courtroom, Hannah Arendt struggled to give expression to the magnitude of evil perpetrated by the undistinguished ex-Nazi bureaucrat sitting in the defendant's box, charged with calmly overseeing the extermination of several million humans. "The banality of evil," she famously termed Eichmann's ruthless bureaucratic efficiency. Eichmann's defense consisted of the claim that he was merely following orders, from which disobedience would have cost him his own life. He was, he insisted, a victim himself. "I am not the monster that I am made out to be," Eichmann declared in a final plea for mercy.

The violence depicted in Kevin McColley's new novel, **The Other Side**, is from another war, in another century, on another continent. The wartime bloodletting that occurs in the Missouri and Kansas territories admittedly lacks the systematic rigor of Eichmann's program; it is arbitrary, gratuitous, and meaningless. The victims number only in the thousands. But a kind of appalling banality also typifies it, residing not only in the average people who organize themselves into bands of jayhawkers and bushwhackers but also in the casual indifference with which they murder their neighbors. The guerrillas' motivations vary: revenge, booty, escape from the strictures of society. To the last man, they have forgotten what it means to be human, and their survival comes at the price of their humanity. They are monsters, although it is less clear how they became such.

Through teenager Jacob Wilson, McColley chronicles the education of one bushwhacker and conveys the sheer ordinariness that marked his evolution into a killer. The novel opens on the eve of Ft. Sumter, with Jacob on his parents' Ohio

riverfront farm, across from the slave state of Kentucky. Unreflective and unaware, he is only vaguely conscious of the gathering political storm. Seventeen years old, he thinks instead about a neighboring girl named Mary, and her likely role in "a future he felt chained to" but to which he nevertheless is resigned. His mother, Clara, is a Calvinist fatalist whose religious beliefs support the abolitionist cause; his father, Cyrus, is a practical man who urges Jacob to think critically.

### **Simple existence unravels**

The Wilsons' simple existence unravels when they agree to harbor two runaway slaves -- a father named Isaac and his daughter, Sarah -- from Kentucky. Isaac and Sarah have fled a plantation owned by Henry Clay's son, and, when told by Jacob that he does not "talk like no slave," an educated Isaac retorts: "I have been to London. I have seen Shakespeare performed, and I have read Chaucer. How do you suggest I speak?"

Cyrus abruptly enlists and departs to join McClellan's army, leaving Jacob and Clara to tend the farm and protect Isaac and Sarah. But a racist local blacksmith named Everett McGown has secured his own commission from the Union, and arrives at the Wilson farmstead with a military detachment to arrest the fugitive slaves, serving as an agent of Lincoln's appeasement of border states like Kentucky. Although McGown's goal is frustrated, Jacob has fallen in love with Sarah and resents the vulgar McGown's criminality. After Jacob, in a fit of fury, uses an axe to kill McGown, he abandons his mother and flees to Kentucky.

Jacob is pursued by awareness that he is a killer, a fate that leaves him restless for a sanctuary from his memory. He finds work as an attendant in a Kentucky brothel, but is soon driven west to Missouri. He stops temporarily in Osceola, where he is employed at a dry goods store owned by a unionist. Ironically, the store's owner is maimed during a raid by Federal cavalrymen who are bent on punishing Osceola for its southern sympathies. When the town is torched, Jacob resumes the peripatetic routine that characterizes the remainder of the novel.

Jacob befriends William "Bloody Bill" Anderson in Missouri and joins up with William Quantrill's bushwhackers. It is worth noting that Jacob remains indifferent to politics, and evinces no concern -- or, actually, consciousness --

about fighting on the opposite side from his father. In a way, though, his affiliation with the guerrillas proves especially apt because the bushwhackers (and their counterparts, the pro-Union jayhawkers) are not ideological so much as thuggish. In peacetime, Quantrill's men would be condemned as rogues, but war has bestowed ideological purpose on their criminality.

### **Theology laden with contradictions**

Consumed by a recurrent specter that induces him to violence, Jacob grapples with the question of God's existence but cannot overcome a belief that theology is laden with contradictions: "God is God of love and beauty and brother for brother and war and death and murder and blood and blood-soaked screams, of hands clasping in friendship and rising in anger, of souls born into this world and of souls fleeing from it and soulless eyes closing forever," he reasons. He offers an Old Testament interpretation of the capricious killing in which he participates, but never acknowledges the possibility of redemption. A deformed teenager named Haywood Lee ("Yes sirree, just like the general!") introduces something of a Christian fool to the plot, although he fails to shake Jacob's fatalism. When, for example, Jacob instinctively shoots a young boy who chances upon the bushwhackers, one companion justifies it by noting, "Ain't no Southerners allowed in this county no more." But Haywood dryly adds, "There ain't no Yankees allowed neither."

For the next 200 pages, the exploits and atrocities of Quantrill's men are recounted. Whatever the high-toned rhetoric of the war to the east, wanton destruction characterizes the bushwhackers' tear across the plains. After a raid on Lawrence, Kansas, the novel describes how "the war took its ugliest turn, scalped men, ears and noses and eyes and fingers as trophies, like for like with each like a little closer to the truth of what we are capable of."

Although Jacob had once declared, "There's something wrong with a fellow who takes pleasure" in killing, he grows to embrace it as ordinary. Confronted with ethical dilemmas, he professes not to care. "Makes no difference to me," he usually remarks. Bill Anderson, Jacob's closest comrade, tallies the men he has killed by tying a knot for each in a rope, and later begins collecting their scalps. Still, he confides in Jacob that he once had doubt about killing, but that the guilt dissipated as his killing become habitual. His heart has grown callous toward violence. "It feels that way to me," Bloody Bill insists. "Or I'd like it to, anyway."

**The Other Side's** anti-heroic depiction of war reaches a climax in page-long summary of atrocities in which Jacob participates, indifferent to their morality, "numb" to their evil. "He was a boy who had murdered horribly, cowering within himself numbly like a boy, closing his eyes to his actions, closing his ears to the cries he had wrung from his victims," McColley writes. "He was still only twenty." Yet the novel is not a sentimental lament for lost innocence; it is a reminder of the banality of evil and the capacity of ordinary people to kill mechanically. But, like Eichmann, the bushwhackers are conscious of what they are doing; some monsters are self-constructed.

In Jacob we have a boy who grew to adulthood without ever developing his own character. From beginning to end he has deftly accommodated himself to changing circumstances, from sheltering runaway slaves to fighting alongside secessionists. Like his undefined politics, his sexual outlets are transient and shifting. Jacob survives but without gaining maturity.

The grand principles that often justify political causes are abstracted from the perceptions and motivations of those who actually fight the resulting battles. "I put you up then because that's what I wanted to do," a farmer tells Bill and Jacob when they return armed to his property. "I'm putting you up now because that's what I got to do. This has become a damned bloody business."

In the hellish frontier of Kevin McColley's novel, one sees the social costs of war. Justice is sacrificed to expediency; good people are killed because they refuse to abandon decency; norms of religion and sexuality give way to disorder and nihilism. Despite several abrupt plot shifts and the occasional use of out-of-place vocabulary (did Civil War-era folk really refer to sex as "poontang"?), **The Other Side** explodes the idealization of war, cautioning against moral numbness. It reminds us finally that civilization is what nudges man to a higher purpose and nobility, away from "the other side" of human nature that is monstrous in its potential.

"Men are free when they are obeying some deep, inward voice of religious belief," D.H. Lawrence observed in *Studies in Classic American Literature*. "Men are free when they belong to a living, Organic, *believing* community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west." At **The Other Side's** finale, Jacob Wilson returns to Ohio with more than his body mutilated; his soul is also tattered.

*Morgan N. Knull is editor of Civil War Book Review.*