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Review

WAR AS REMEMBRANCE

Novel reconstructs a lovestruck childhood overwhelmed by events

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Reed, John *A Still Small Voice*. Delacorte Press, 2000-09-01. ISBN 385334052

John Reed's first novel, **A Still Small Voice**, is told as a memoir of Alma Flynt, an orphan girl who is taken in by her Aunt Bettina in Kentucky, just prior to the War. Alma learns herb and root healing from her aunt and falls in love with John Warren Cleveland, the younger son of the neighboring Cleveland family, and the story follows them through the Civil War and its hardships.

Reed's style is rich and vivid, yet perhaps a bit too effulgent. Although Alma is charming precisely because she is precocious and original, the self-conscious style often strains too hard at its own figures. For example, Alma frets at the lack of letters during her wartime separation from John Warren:

And it was a needle in my body - that want. But I imagined the past was a similar pain in my soldier. I thought of that needle not as a sewing needle, but as a compass needle. . . .

It was the needle of a compass - set free to cut in our bodies. And why did he not write? Why did we not find each other? Because the needle did not point from him to me, or me to him - but just north.

This metaphor transforms itself from a needle that stabs to compass needle to something like a blade. The last sentence here almost sounds like an attempt to invoke John Donne's geometric compass ("A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"), but it is not developed. Finally, this compass needle always points north, and we are left to guess what it could possibly signify in such a context.

And Alma and John Warren are like no children we have ever seen. We are surprised at the love-at-first-sight relationship between them, and their first kiss of passion at ages 8 and 11, respectively: ". . . our breath intermingled - and then

our lips met, as delicately as the wings of butterflies in violets." Even when we take into account that the narrator Alma, as an old woman, is giving us an idealized and romanticized reading of her memory, we are a little skeptical of the high poetic splendor of their fairy-tale romance.

The reader may also be puzzled by historical gaps, such as why no mention is made of the Confederate invasion of central Kentucky by Braxton Bragg and Edmund Kirby Smith in the summer and fall of 1862, which should have barged right through the Bluegrass country where the children's homes are located. Besides, the bulk of Kentucky was occupied by Union troops early in the War and, with the exception of Bragg's invasion and John Hunt Morgan's raids later in the War, was largely untouched by Confederate operations.

The Union occupation, therefore, was largely a peaceful one. In this light, the devastation dealt out to the Cleveland family seems too much. Also, the wearing of sweaters by Kentucky gentlemen, the playing of croquet, the use of kerosene, Santa Claus, fresh fruit in May when Aunt Bettina dies, and the presence of coyotes in Kentucky in 1862 may be minor anachronisms, but they are jarring nonetheless.

A Still Small Voice has discernable power, however. One of the best passages of its kind in Civil War fiction is found in the scripture battle over slavery between Aunt Bettina and Mrs. Esterbrook. A desperate rescue later in the novel, when Aunt Bettina carries John Warren and Alma across the raging stream during a storm to save their lives, is truly magnificent.

John Reed's instincts are good, and we look forward to seeing more of his lyrical and distinctive style better deployed in future works.

Randal Allred is associate professor of English and teaches writing and American literature at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. He has recently published articles on battle reenacting and on Stephen Crane, and is working on a book on writing the Civil War in American fiction.