

Who Shot The Colonel?: Pinkerton Agent Stands Accused Of A Crime He Was Sent To Prevent

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Review

WHO SHOT THE COLONEL?

Pinkerton agent stands accused of a crime he was sent to prevent

Howerton, Helen

Spring 2001

Kilian, Michael *A Killing at Ball's Bluff*. Prime Crime, 2001-01-01. ISBN 425178048

A Killing at Ball's Bluff is the second installment in Michl Kilian's Harrison Raines Civil War Mystery series. Kilian, Washington, D.C., correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* and veteran mystery writer, has chosen to set his historical fiction series around significant battles and some real-life personalities. Our hero is Captain Harrison Raines, scion of a southern family, now employed by Allan Pinkerton in the Union's fledging Secret Service. He has received an anonymous message to protect at all costs a Union colonel named Edward Baker, a longtime friend of Abraham Lincoln.

Raines finds Baker at Ball's Bluff, Virginia, where the colonel exhibits the ineptitude and lack of military knowledge that will lead to his death in battle on October 21, 1861. Kilian uses the historical fact of Edward Baker's death to create a murder mystery that finds Raines accused of the very crime he was assigned to prevent.

The author spares few details when describing the engagement at Ball's Bluff. Dry facts are interspersed with plenty of dialogue that moves the story along in a convincing fashion. Kilian portrays his protagonist as having few illusions left, even though the war is in its infancy. Raines's father and brother are serving in the Confederate army; his entire family lives below the Mason-Dixon line. But he hates the "peculiar institution" and all it stands for, and supports the Union cause. Kilian does a credible job of illustrating the dilemma such a person would face, with loyalties to both sides of the conflict.

The novel starts slowly as the author introduces his readers to characters and background information that will eventually bear on the colonel's murder.

Kilian's liberal sprinkling of real places and real people-Leesburg and Ball's Bluff, Virginia; the city of Washington; the unfortunate Colonel Baker; President Lincoln; known and unknown Rebel spies; and even John Wilkes Booth-is inspired, demonstrating a great deal of true scholarship.

The story then gallops along with Raines chasing after would-be pirates and Rebel agents, uncovering a plethora of disguise and identity confusion that may have the reader reaching for a scorecard. At the heart of the story is the extent that those working behind the scenes, behind petticoats as it were, can influence the course of conflict. In **A Killing at Ball's Bluff**, Michl Kilian takes the facts of the death of Colonel Baker and creates for his readers a fictional scenario that entertains and educates at the same time.

Helen Howerton is the contributing editor for Murder: Past Tense, the journal of the Historical Mystery Appreciation Society. She is also chairman of the Convention Committee for the 2003 meeting of Left Coast Crime, an annual gathering of mystery authors and readers.