

# Civil War Book Review

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## Literature In Context

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## Feature Essay

### LITERATURE IN CONTEXT

Madden, David

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**Stowe, Harriet Beecher and Johnson, Charles.** *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Oxford University Press, \$22.00 ISBN 195158164

This novel, sesquicentennial edition of Harriet Beecher Stowe's world classic novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is Charles Johnson's book. His brief but forceful and provocative introduction will overwhelm whatever the reader experiences in the Johnson has written four novels, one of which, *Middle Passage*, winner of the National Book Award, brings alive the agony of slaves packed flesh against flesh in the hell holds of ships out of Africa. He has had his say in his own novel and now, on this special occasion, he declares an attitude and sets a tone for the novel with which Stowe is to have her say.

According to Johnson, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* can still serve us, though not in the way that Stowe and her admirers intended. It invites us to discuss whether a white author can successfully portray a black person *in his own terms*, instead of through the distorting, funhouse mirror of white, Eurocentric ideas about people of color. . . . Stowe's book challenges us in 2002 to ask whether it is possible ever to write well the lived experience of the racial Other. And for that reason, if none other, her novel deserves attention at this dawn of a new millennium.

My own answer, as a novelist, to Johnson's question is, YES! in thunder. A NO! answer, if I believed it, would force me to surrender to barbarism my conviction that the imagination of writers, as a God-given gift, is potent enough to penetrate all human mysteries, and that the compassion of readers, as a God-given gift, is rich enough to respond fully to the writers' expressions of those mysteries. Nothing human is alien to me, said the second-century playwright Terence.

Johnson does not answer his own question. He leaves that much room for readers to try to experience Stowe's own intentions and make their own literary and humanistic judgments. The NO! answer that some people shout means that humans who are not black can never understand blacks, as if they were not only another race, but another species, an idea cherished by racists in Stowe's day and that was her prime target. NO! is an answer that leads humanity to accept, ultimately, to paraphrase William Faulkner, the end of man. And humanity must refuse to accept that.

Johnson's introduction may make the novel unreadable for some readers. But I would turn his caveat around 180 degrees and declare with equal force that Johnson's insights, comments, and questions can provide reasons enough to reread the novel that made Abraham Lincoln, on meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe, say, So this is the little lady who wrote the book that made this great war. First-time readers may wonder why a classic that Johnson says is somewhat badly written and somewhat racist in spite of its aims is worth reading at all.

Johnson's novel won a prize. Stowe's novel won the hearts of untold millions worldwide and, unique among novels, helped win a war that freed the slaves about whom Johnson wrote more graphically than Stowe. Why not read both books and weep?

*Founding director of the United States Civil War Center, David Madden is author of the Civil War novel, Sharpshooter, and editor of Classics of Civil War Fiction and Beyond the Battlefield.*