

My Dearest Cecelia: A Novel of the Southern Belle Who Stole General Sherman's Heart

June Pulliam

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Review

Pulliam, June

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Haeger, Diane *My Dearest Cecelia: A Novel of the Southern Belle Who Stole General Sherman's Heart*. St. Martin's Press, \$24.95 ISBN 312282001

Star-crossed lovers

Novel tells the story of an unlikely romance

Setting a novel in the 1860s American South and populating it with historical figures doesn't necessarily make the book a Civil War novel. That is the case with **My Dearest Cecelia**, Diane Haeger's historical romance that imagines a relationship between William Tecumseh Sherman and Georgia belle, Cecelia Stovall. Cecelia first meets a young Cump (as he is called by his friends) at a West Point commencement ball where her brothers also attend school. Of course, the two immediately fall in love, but the relationship is impossible because a) Cump is a Northerner, and not a wealthy one at that, and b) Cecelia's father has plans for her to wed his wealthy business partner. To complicate matters, Cump has a fiancé at home not willing to lose her beau to another woman. These people manage to keep the lovers apart in spite of their best efforts to reunite. Cump and Cecelia ultimately marry others, are greatly unhappy in these relationships, and have two bittersweet, brief reunions. But both must eventually return to their rightful places in their worlds.

The problems with **My Dearest Cecelia** arise with the author's attempts to recreate a historical period. The ability to represent this atmosphere convincingly is necessary for any work of fiction that aims to be seen as Civil War literature or as a historical romance, since readers select these sorts of narratives precisely because they wish to be immersed in the details of a particular time. Haeger fails to create a compelling fictional universe in the Civil War era. While the dates of events are correct and historical characters are introduced in a plausible way, the novel is short on details that would transport the reader back to another century. There is very little to help readers visualize what it would be like to live before electricity, air conditioning, cars, modern medical treatment, or even shampoo.

Some notable exceptions have to do with the difficulties of sending a missive before the information age. Cump and Cecelia are constantly attempting to exchange letters, but in the nineteenth century, one couldn't simply drop an envelope in the local mailbox. Because Cecelia lives in a rural area, letters had to be given to trusted servants who could post the documents at the appropriate place. And the unmarried Cecelia isn't in control of the servants, who are ultimately bribed or coerced by her father and brothers into relinquishing her correspondence. Cump's letters also go astray when confiscated by Cecelia's interfering family. A second exception to Haeger's lack of historical detail concerns her attention to costume, but this is something one would expect to find in a romance novel. Alas, this information isn't enough to make the story compelling.

An important element of any historical novel is the creation of characters shaped by the relevant issues of their day. Haeger's Cecelia is a bitter opponent of slavery, first coming to understand the horror of the South's peculiar institution after learning of her father's sexual relationships with female slaves. She is later moved by a reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and eventually works with the Underground Railroad. Unfortunately, Cecelia isn't a multidimensional character. She spends very little time contemplating other important events of her time, and thus, her anti-slavery fervor sounds more like naive idealism than anything arising out of a developing consciousness formed by other intellectual movements. And her work with the Underground Railroad strains credulity. Cecelia is asked to help with the Underground Railroad by her trusted slave and childhood friend, Cretia, who knows of her mistress' abolitionist sentiments. It would seem very unlikely that a slave — even one who saw her mistress as a friend — would risk the safety of escaped slaves in this way. Cecilia's plantation home is huge, and so there is very little need for her to know it is a station on the Underground Railroad since passengers could have been concealed from her with very little trouble, especially while the virulently pro-slavery master is away at war. Why would Cretia risk sharing this information with someone who could easily let it slip and undo them all?

Haeger's characterization of William Sherman is especially weak. Readers with even the smallest amount of knowledge about General Sherman and his scorched earth policy would have a difficult time recognizing him in this novel. In her attempt to make Sherman a completely sympathetic character, she left out the details of his devastating campaign and brilliant military strategy, and worse still, she didn't flesh out what was left. All we really know about Haeger's

Sherman is that he likes to draw, he enjoys military life, and is unhappy in his marriage. Are we to assume that he burned his way through the South as a way of channeling his anger over not being able to marry Cecelia?

A final annoying component of the novel is the author's attempts to represent southern dialects, both black and white. Haeger's white southern characters have a terminal case of mush mouth, constantly slurring the beginnings or endings of words (bout, mo', fo'). And while her African-American characters don't speak the nearly unrecognizable baby talk they do in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, their speech isn't much better than their white counterparts. Her representation of southern speech is particularly offensive since her northern characters are all capable of speaking standard English. This difference puts southerners in the position of exoticized Others.

I have nothing against the romance genre in general, and have been known to enjoy particular, well-written, historical romances when they're not so much focused on two people attempting to maintain their love against all odds, but rather, two people inhabiting a universe very different from my own. That is not the case in **My Dearest Cecelia**. The historical detail is lacking and the characters are weak. Someone searching for a good Civil War novel will be deeply disappointed.

June Pulliam is the co-author of Hooked on Horror: A Guide to Reading Interests in the Genre and managing editor of Necropsy: The Review of Horror Fiction (www.lsu.edu/necrofile). She teaches courses in horror and Civil War literature at Louisiana State University, and can be reached at jpullia@lsu.edu.