

White Doves at Morning

James Gordon Bennett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Bennett, James Gordon (2003) "White Doves at Morning," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol5/iss2/20>

Review

Bennett, James Gordon

Spring 2003

Burke, James Lee *White Doves at Morning*. Simon & Schuster, \$25.00 ISBN 743244710

From crime fiction to historical novel

Familiar author takes on a new genre

After making his commercial bones in crime fiction, James Lee Burke takes a shot at an historical novel with **White Doves at Morning**, a Civil War melodrama featuring the best-selling author's usual suspects only in period costume. This time out, oddly enough, Burke slips a couple of his own ancestors into the lineup: Robert Perry, a privileged son of slave owners, and his salt of the earth buddy, Willie Burke, who is as poor as Perry is rich. What the two Confederate volunteers have in common besides their feelings about the mistreatment of slaves (they're agin' it) is an affection for the bounteous abolitionist, Abigail Dowling. Figuring into the love triangle are the inevitable Faulknerian influences: a ravaged landscape, miscegenation, and cornpone phonetics ("Don't never ax Master or his family or the mens he hire to tell you the troot"). Without crime fiction's whodunit thread to tie the plot together, the novel unravels messily despite the rushed pink bow of an epilogue.

But then reading this Civil War saga is like watching professional wrestling. You don't need a program to distinguish who's naughty from who's nice down in Burke's land of cotton. The especially naughty are physically repulsive, use the "N" word, and don't read poetry. The really nice (despite fighting for the Confederacy) are well groomed, morally conflicted about slavery, read William Blake, and are blood relatives of the author. In other words, Burke handles characterization the way the Incredible Hulk handles the breakaway furniture. You can't take either of them seriously. And nobody gets hurt. But unlike the wild world of professional wrestling, the humor in **White Doves at Morning** appears unintentional.

Flower, whose mother was a slave defiled by the dastardly Marse Jamison who lives in the big house, comes under the kindly tutelage of the generous-hearted Willie Burke. "I learned to spell 3 new words this morning," records the unschooled waif in her lined tablet. "Mr. Willie say not to write down hard words lessen I look them up first." Apparently, Flower does some serious looking up. The next time we see her pick up her pencil, she's reflecting in a "Post Script" on the confounding behavior of her bigoted father: "I know I should hate him. But it is not what I feel. Why would a man not love his own daughter?" Philosophically nonplused, she concludes: "Why is my father different? Why is he cruel when he does not have to be?"

Reader postscript: Why didn't Burke answer the girl's preternatural questions? It might have made for a far more interesting novel. And that's the troot.

James Gordon Bennett's reviews of contemporary fiction have appeared in The New York Times Book Review.