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Red River

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Review

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Nagle, P.G. *Red River*. Forge Publishers, \$25.95 ISBN 765303442

Louisiana's waterways:

A world powered by steam

Red River depicts not just Louisiana during the Red River campaign of the Civil War, but life in the middle of 19th century America, where commerce is so heavily dependant on the river and the new but still extremely limited and dangerous technology of the steam engine. P. G. Nagle recreates this period of history along this waterway through three characters whose lives flow together much like the various rivers of the novel. Union river pilot Nat Wheat is charged with converting paddle boats into tin clads (as iron clads were often called), then ferrying them down the Red, Black and Atchafalaya Rivers, treacherous sailing even when the enemy isn't shooting at you. Among Nat's occupational hazards are his constant nightmares about the very likely possibility that the temperamental boiler could easily explode, scalding to death the craft's occupants. Such a fate was suffered by Nat's beloved uncle, and his death caused Wheat Senior to forbid his son to pursue a livelihood on the river. Of course, nothing is so attractive as what is forbidden by one's parents, so naturally only a career on the river will satisfy Nat. Thus, when the war is declared, he joins the military partly out of a sense of patriotism, but also as a way to defy his father's wishes.

But the rivers provide more than a quick way for military vessels to travel. The better plantations are located on their banks, not only because the soil is rich, but because in the mid 19th century, these bodies of water provide the most reliable means of transporting raw materials to market. Marie Hawkland, mistress of three plantations nestled in the confluence of the Mississippi and Red Rivers near Angola, is one of these people whose property is so situated. However, this central location is a mixed blessing as it also makes her plantation and its goods entirely too visible and vulnerable to attack. Marie watches the tin

clads with great trepidation, fearing that either Union or Confederate forces could confiscate her crops or set fire to her home to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.

The location of the Hawklands' plantations make them convenient and logical meeting points for various characters. The novel's third protagonist, Confederate officer Jamie Russell, has occasion to come ashore and make the acquaintance of Mrs. Hawkland. He realizes that she is no stranger, but instead, a married woman he recently shared an intimate encounter with in Houston.

Nagle's narrative isn't just a world powered by antiquated technologies or navigated through natural highways. Predictably, it is also a world where people have changed their ideas of what is true and just. The newly widowed Marie finds that she must suddenly learn how to run her plantations with their accompanying hundreds of slaves. Marie is a kinder mistress than most, and her slaves generally esteem her. However, this esteem does not prevent them from wanting their freedom, and Marie realizes that soon there will be nothing she can do to stop them from leaving. If the war teaches the main characters anything, it is the same lesson learned by others during this time period—that their culture's ideas about African-Americans are completely wrong. Marie has never been one of those mistresses so sheltered that she believes her slaves are completely happy in their condition. Instead, she quite candidly concedes that keeping slaves benefits her economically, and she doesn't attempt to justify her labor arrangements through any belief that slaves are better off in her care than they would be on their own. However, while her husband was alive, Marie had been kept ignorant of the nasty details of enslaving a large group of people, and so the actions of her rapacious and unscrupled overseer come as a nasty surprise to her. Nor is she prepared for her slaves' depth of anger about their condition when she happens upon them giving their former overseer his brutal comeuppance. These beliefs about African-Americans and slaves aren't just something found down south. Northerner Nat Wheat harbors a distrust of African-Americans, but his attitudes are changed through the novel through his relationship with Adams, one of the ship's carpenters in the Union Army. As well, Jamie Russell will have to question everything he has learned about the way life should be when he must come to terms with the fruits of the adulterous night he spent with Marie.

Various fans of Civil War literature will enjoy **Red River** because the narrative doesn't fit into any one subgenre; rather it is like Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, part battle narrative and part study of the lives of people affected by

the war. Marie Hawkland is a particularly engaging character, as she's not the stereotypical southern belle bemoaning how the war ruined her hoop skirts and any chances at finding a decent beau. Instead, she's an intelligent and thoughtful woman who meets adversity with vitality and determination. For the most part, Nagle's characters aren't the clichéd types often seen in Civil War fiction, with the exception of Shelton, the Hawklands' villainous overseer, a subtle version of Simon Legre (Is there anywhere in Civil War literature where this character is represented in a sympathetic, or at least different, light, I wonder).

Red River is a pleasant blend of history and fiction. Nagle's characters are fictional, but the places they occupy and the battles they fought are not. People who have resided in Louisiana will especially enjoy this novel, as they will doubtless recognize not only some of the smaller rivers that were major thoroughfares in the 19th century, but also Angola, Louisiana, now the site of the state penitentiary and Panola plantation.

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.