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Birthright

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Review

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Blount, Clay *Birthright*. New South Books, \$27.95 hardcover ISBN 1588381455

Fraternal feud

New novelist offers different story of battling brothers

Most Civil War sagas feature families torn asunder *by* the war, particularly when beliefs about slavery and states' rights separate blood relations. In Clay Blount's **Birthright**, however, brothers Winston and Jeffrey Carthage have been separated three years *before* the war begins. Their separation has been a long time in coming as the two are destined to clash due to radically different temperaments. Winston, his father's eldest son, the ever dutiful child, follows in the paternal footsteps as the hard-working and morally upright manager of the family plantation. Jeremy, perhaps due to a need by younger siblings to differentiate themselves from their brothers and sisters, is the opposite of the dutiful son, spending his time drinking, frequenting houses of ill repute, and gambling. These habits cause him to flunk out of three colleges and to accumulate an enormous gambling debt, which he hopes to pay from his inheritance upon his father's death. So when most of the family fortune is left to Winston, Jeremy is quite angry and contests the will. But his case is weak, and he knows it, so he resorts to underhanded tactics in a desperate attempt to prevail. Enter Pritchard, a bloodthirsty mercenary, hired to smear and perhaps intimidate Winston before the case goes to trial. Jeremy loses the lawsuit, and the brothers part bitterly. Pritchard too is particularly bitter, since Jeremy's loss means that he won't be paid for his services.

Jeremy leaves for Washington, D.C., carving out some financial stability after assuming a new identity and getting a job as a loan officer. Winston, meanwhile, is widowed, and turns towards parenting his teenaged son. Seeing that war is inevitable, Winston also takes steps to protect his son's birthright, transferring material assets into safer and more liquid forms that are more likely

to survive trying times.

The years pass, and war comes, leaving each a broken, and in some ways desperate, man, not so much due to their separation as from the paths their lives have taken. Winston is ill and alone, his son is away fighting for the Confederacy. Meanwhile, Jeremy's moral turpitude causes him to lose the financial stability he has managed to briefly create, so he returns to Mississippi hoping to steal the last of the family fortune. And Pritchard, true to character, sniffs money and is close behind his debtor, determined to be paid regardless of the cost to others.

While Blount's novel leads to a predictable denouement--a knock-down drag-out fight over money--the path to this climax is reasonably enjoyable due to his competent writing and characterization. While each character is a recognizable type--the morally upright planter who abhors slavery, the spend-thrift gambler, the cold-blooded killer for hire, the whore with the heart of gold, etc.--each is engagingly developed so as not to become a one-dimensional figure. It also helps that Blount's protagonist is likeable and engaging. And indeed, predictability is both a pitfall *and* pillar of Civil War literature, as it is already known how the war concluded, so writers can often be forgiven if their characters are archetypes in a genre that routinely spawns epics.

Still, Blount does things that are original and compelling. The novel also manages to capture the flavor of small town southern life in the 1860s, at least from a male perspective, as female characters don't play a major role in **Birthright**. A particularly notable scene involves Winston and his best friend, newspaperman Sam Morris, who rescues a prostitute from an angry religious mob who descends on the local bawdy house.

Also, the central battle over the birthright of the title is also representative of the War, if perhaps from a modern rehabilitated southern perspective. The birthright that Winston struggles to pass on to his son isn't so much money or land, but morality and a work ethic that allows him to succeed in life. In some ways, Winston Carthage is the embodiment of the ideal southern gentleman planter. Winston's father is the embodiment of the southern pioneer come to the New World in order to achieve a middle class solidity. A hardworking, moral, and ambitious bookkeeper, the elder Mr. Carthage improves his fortunes after coming into possession of another's ill-gotten gold. The family wealth is established, and the plantation and all its slaves eventually passed on to Winston,

who is a chip off of his father's block. Winston himself is reminiscent of the gentleman planters in *Gone With the Wind*, who don't really believe in slavery, but then again, don't feel too terribly about their own version of the peculiar institution since they treat their slaves like family. Winston is no fan of the war, and frees his slaves before they are manumitted by the Emancipation Proclamation. There are a good deal of characters similar to Winston in much modern Civil War literature, and so I don't really know if I should be annoyed by Blount as joining the ranks of writers who seem to be recreating a politically correct Civil War South, or see him as recreating a diversity of mid 19th century Southern thought.

While **Birthright** lacks the originality to join the annals of classic Civil War literature, it is nevertheless a compelling and enjoyable read by this first-time novelist.

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