

The Rebels of Babylon

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Review

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Parry, Owen *The Rebels of Babylon*. William Morrow, an Imprint of HarperCollins, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 6051392

Crescent City caper

Another Abel installment

In this sixth novel of the Abel Jones series, we are brought to the winter of 1862-63, and the war is not half done, yet. For a series that promises to reach ten novels, if not more, Owen Parry has not come close to running out of material.

However, in this novel, he may have run up against the limitations of his choice of settings. During the war, Federal-occupied New Orleans was a hotbed of political jobbery, graft, military corruption, and illegal trading, especially in illegitimate commodities such as raw cotton from behind the Confederate lines. It is the place where carpetbagging came early. It is a city fraught with extremes of all kinds--sins of the flesh, treachery, deception, and dark arts. We are accustomed to bizarre happenings in Parry's novels. Here, one may feel it is being laid on too thick. Our credulity is tested, especially since we are getting this all from the perspective of Major Jones, whom we have come to trust as a sober narrator not given to hyperbole.

The **Rebels of Babylon**, as with the other books in this series, enters the rather weird underworld of a country at war. It is not to the battlefields that we are taken, but to the undercurrents and off-scourings of the human race. Major Abel Jones is a character of unsurpassed genuine texture. We have come to appreciate his homespun insights and trenchant observations on human nature and its follies. Full of Methodist parsimony and Welsh practicality, Jones is a bundle of contradictions. He is a soldier who has foresworn war; he is a humble man who regrets his pride; he fears violence and yet is distressingly efficient in a fight; he is compassionate yet bigoted and biased; he is a devoted Christian and yet fears and suspects his own lack of faith. Doubting the efficacy of what he is

doing as a special agent for the government, he has just enough moral sense of obligation and outrage at injustice to feel that he must do something. But in this novel, he is sickened by the cruelty and horror and ghastly wickedness of the human race, enough that he has decided to refuse any more special missions--if he survives this one--and to resign his commission and go home to manage his wife's estate and raise his family in peace. He even rejects a lieutenant colonel's commission offered from Washington as an obvious bribe.

It was inevitable that Abel Jones should have a mission in New Orleans--the Babylon of America. In the series, Parry has led his character Jones through battlefields as well as sexual deviancy, murder, incest, industrial espionage, mesmerism, madhouses, witchcraft, foreign agents, necrophilia, cannibalism, corrupt priests, labor troubles, and so on. In this novel--literally in the first sentence--we begin with a mad chase through the streets of New Orleans' *Vieux Carre*, with Jones after a black woman with a large snake, who spreads destruction and mayhem in all directions and disappears. Before he is able to catch his breath, he is netted in a slave pen, attacked by a gang of toughs with a bottle of ether, fends them off, falls into the street, fights his way through a bordello, and ends up battling a scarred mulatto in the parlor of the place with a medieval pole-ax. The pace is as intense as any Indiana Jones movie (they are no relation, I am sure), and does not let up. Within the first 24 hours (much less, really), Jones is taken on this chase, buried alive in a tomb full of rotting corpses, freed, shot at, forced to shoot and kill a negro sharpshooter, saved from a cottonmouth dropped in his shower, poisoned, rushed in a carriage at top speed through the city, taken to a voodooienne for a cure, dosed, thrown naked into the cold Mississippi, rushed to the home of a monstrous and mysterious (and subtle) epicure named Papa Champlain, fed coffee and macarons and beignets--and all of this before the next day has broken.

Major Abel Jones has been sent by Secretary William Seward on a personal favor to investigate the murder of Miss Susan Peabody, the idealist abolition-minded daughter of a wealthy friend of the Lincoln administration. Miss Peabody had gone to New Orleans to see what she might do for the Negro. She got involved in a hare-brained scheme to ship them back to Africa, somehow abetted by her distant relative Mrs. Aubrey, and then turned up murdered--and apparently assaulted--on the levee one night.

Jones finds himself entangled with a gallery of eccentric characters: the *voudouiennes*, the volatile politically-appointed commander of Union forces

General Banks, a bloody-minded Rebel dentist, a mysterious cold-blooded Englishwoman named Jane Aubrey, a flayed negro in a blood-drenched house, a Spanish Creole woman found in his room, a half-addled Union army captain whose father has influence in the government, a ghostly purveyor of fine antiquities (whose shop precisely matches the description of an actual shop I have been in on Royal Street--Parry did his homework) full of mysterious stories named Monsieur H. Beyle, a priestess named Madame Blanch, and a host of ruffians and grotesques who are ever bent on his destruction, among numerous others. And a character from a past novel shows up in the nick of time to assist him: the improbable Englishman Barnaby B. Barnaby, a gentleman's gentleman who had had a haberdashery in the city before the war. His absurd, Dickens-esque appearance belies his perspicacity and quick thinking in danger, and his knowledge of the city saves Jones more than once. Like Jones, Barnaby is also a kind of cracker-barrel philosopher. Barnaby's come-what-may, open mind teaches Jones a few things about tolerance, too, and the kind of blindness that prevents illumination: Oh, Major Jones, he told me, unrepentant, if only folks doesn't do one another a damage, I'm inclined to let them go any way they wants. Our only hope of salvation lies in Christ. He nodded. Don't that seem a bit selfish and vain on Is part? He was hopeless. I only know that, without my faith, I could not endure another God-given day. But let that bide.

Jones later concludes: If there were no hymns upon his lips, Mr. Barnaby had a Christian heart. And a better one than many a man who praised the Lord and pocketed his rents.

The moral landscape we are taken through only gets worse, as we are treated to murder, voodoo ritual killings, treason, kidnapping, orgies, magic, political corruption, vengeance, and the faded yet potent mystery of unrequited love and the decades-long grudges held, somehow all tied up in the murder of Miss Peabody. We see that the root of evil in this novel is not a fell conspiracy of voodoo magic and human sacrifice, although forces--even mysterious, inexplicable and ineffable forces--are at work to make Jones think so and throw him off the trail. Instead, he uncovers a secret plan to re-take freed Negroes and sell them back into slavery in the Caribbean nations, then still using slavery. There is much money to be made here, and the fear among the blacks of New Orleans is palpable.

After a thrilling chase on a warship down the river, and the rescue of some (but not all) of the slaves in a burning ship, Jones returns to the city, powerless to

bring legal action against Mrs. Aubrey and the devious Union army captain who were behind the scheme. Ignoring his usual sense of ethics, he leaves them to the Negroes of New Orleans for revenge. The story gives us an unalloyed view of the viciousness of racism and the added horror of it coming from cynical sources. It is not the Rebels, after all, who have organized this scheme.

We are treated to the well-crafted prose of Mr. Parry, his keenly rendered characters, as well as the authenticity of Abel Jones' own idiom. Throughout the story, humor laces the grim events as they spin out: for instance, Jones' understated aside, describing his chase through the mad city, and at one point, confessing, I regret to say harsh language was employed. Faced with armed ruffians, he tells us that they carried cutlasses, In defiance of the provost marshal's regulations, I must add. **Rebels of Babylon** is an excellent read, and a further motivation to watch for the next installment of Abel Jones' adventures.

Randal Allred is associate professor of English and teaches writing and American literature at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, where he also directs the Honors Program. He has recently published articles on battle reenacting as well as Stephen Crane. He is writing a book on battle reenacting that is due out in 2006, and is working on a book on writing the Civil War in American fiction.