

The Curse of Cain

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Review

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Powell, J. Mark and Meagher, L.D.. *The Curse of Cain*. Forge Books, \$24.95, hardcover ISBN 765310880

Booth and Basil

An added assassination plot

Not only is the plotting of J. Mark Powell and L.D. Meagher's Civil War mystery-thriller **The Curse of Cain** preposterous, the characterization lazy, and the dialogue cringe-inducing, but the book can do real harm if by some miseducational catastrophe it falls into the hands of young readers unacquainted with what happened at the close of the Civil War. Perish the thought of legions of teenagers or young collegians thinking all the war came down to was who held a derringer and who tried to keep it from being used.

In light of the novel's superficiality and incuriosity, perhaps it was only to be expected that its authors tell us on the back flap they write for CNN Headline News. In **The Curse of Cain**, they perform their day job on the weeks leading up to Lincoln's assassination, reducing the complicated last months of Lincoln's and John Wilkes Booth's lives to the usual here-is-what-it-looked-like, here-is-what-was-said template. In what may well be another instance of CNN's usual obsession with the latest lady killer, they also add a hired Ted Bundy to the festivities, albeit a light-complected one, like the young villain in *Cold Mountain*. A rogue Georgia die-hard senator has paid a strange-looking cutthroat named Basil Tarleton \$10,000 to stalk and kill Lincoln. And of course, we should not forget the contribution to the story of a ragtag *Day of the Jackal*-type effort, sponsored by the Confederacy to thwart Lincoln's killing. The book does retain most of the elements of the Booth plot that are generally agreed to, except, that is, for a reason to care. The stakes on the line in the event of an Andrew Johnson presidency are glossed over, but implied to be undesirable.

Unfortunately for the hapless Union, the ineptitude of the Confederacy's hired spies who have been charged to terminate Tarleton with extreme prejudice, lest the South bear the brunt of an avenging North and The Curse of Cain for all eternity, prevents them from changing history in a way favorable to Lincoln's health. And I don't think I'm spoiling anything when I tell you Lincoln dies again, only this time for the cause of this botch of a novel. Before he does, we must slog through at least 200 pages of exasperating near-misses on the part of those trying to catch Tarleton and Booth--repetition of such set-pieces is hardly enough to keep a historical novel going. In such books we must continually be surprised to learn more about what we thought we already knew. It might have helped had we run into more of the real historical personages than just the annoying fop Booth, who gets the standard brandy-soused vain actor treatment, but only the prodigiously effective Secretary of Defense Stanton makes an interesting appearance. But in the end, for his sake, we wish he hadn't appeared at all.

The sequences with the tortured, officious Stanton do strike the right key, but the authors aren't interested in investigating why Stanton, the partisan Pennsylvania Democrat who kept Buchanan from giving away *every* federal arsenal in the South, would be motherly in concern for Lincoln's safety but also consort with radical Republicans who could be planning his demise. The authors take the easy out with ambiguity and amateurishly say so in an afterword. But ambiguity should never be the end of any exploration, especially with so many questions about Stanton's loyalty still in wide circulation. Attacks on his reputation did not begin and end with Otto Eisenshiml's half-baked series of Lincoln conspiracy tracts that began seeing print in the late 1920s.

Most recently Leonard F. Guttredge and Ray A. Neff all but accuse Stanton of pulling the trigger on a coup if not on the president in their *Dark Union: The Secret Web of Profiteers, Politicians, and Booth Conspirators That Led to Lincoln's Death* (2003). They reach their conclusion based on their find of several documents kept by a secret police organization Stanton apparently oversaw. Their case is weak, assuming too many mouths could stay shut and too many documents have been untampered with for too long. And the brave contribution to the survival of the U.S. by a man so sick with asthma and grief for his recently-deceased wife and children that he should probably have been retired in Arizona the war long is again, in this novel libeled.

The book's offenses to the craft of the novel are numerous enough to occupy an entire review, but I will only say that the plot demands we assume the following : 1) a very tall, very blonde, very well-dressed and very coldly blue-eyed male serial killer can go about his trade killing prostitutes and travelers in the middle Atlantic states and the District for weeks, abandoning bloodied corpses at every turn but arousing no suspicion; 2) the same serial killer can operate with an evident shortage of intellect and a surplus of reckless arrogance; 3) Jefferson Davis would rely on random chance rather than a check of qualifications to decide which agent to assign to kill Tarleton and save Lincoln; 4) the experienced female Confederate spy will behave like any other damsel-in-distress once the male hero arrives on the scene from Richmond, and her first thought after starting work on their mission will be to seduce him; 5) Booth needs no cause for killing Lincoln until the end of the book when he decides based on an improvised Lincoln victory speech that White Supremacy is enough; 6) Edwin Stanton *may* be in on the hiring of the serial killer and the cover-up that follows, but, for some reason he still seals every road out of Washington City to ensure Booth is caught.

The characterization demands we put aside every prior notion readers have acquired over their lifetimes that suggest human beings tend to think and behave with consistency, so that in **The Curse of Cain** they're all capable of nearly complete transformations in motive, intelligence, and habit at the plot's convenience. The dialogue demands that we believe our characters talk like they do in B-movies from the 1940s. This scene, in which the hero, the Confederate intelligence agent Jack Tanner (who gets named Jack Tanner in a novel set before the 1940s, anyway?) first encounters his comely, red-haired case officer, Kate St. Clare, who has been gathering scuttlebutt from state dinners about the Union's moves for years to pass on to Richmond: Jack bent forward. You don't trust me?

That's not it, Kate leaned closer until her head was almost grazing his. The less you know about my operation, the better it will be for you.

And for you.

Frankly, yes. Her features softened. Do you hate me now?

His eyes again took hold of hers. I don't think I could ever hate you.

She raised her hand and stroked the coarse stubble of his square chin. I hope not, she whispered.

Perhaps we've been spoiled by the crackling profane Shakespearean talk we have come to expect from our 19th century characters as a result of television series like *Deadwood* and novels like Cormac McCarthy's, but we *don't* expect three clichés to every line.

It is hard to discern a purpose for a book that seeks its part in the fledgling but lively Civil War mystery genre but falls so short of the standard set by the marvelous Owen Parry in his richly contextualized, stunningly clever, and fiercely stereotype-flouting Abel Jones novels.

Jeff Smithpeters recently completed his Ph.D. in American Literature at Louisiana State University. His dissertation examines Civil War novels in the social contexts of the authors who wrote them. He has taught writing and literature at LSU, University of Arkansas, Baton Rouge Community College and River Parishes Community College.