

Sons of Liberty

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Review

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Jakober, Marie *Sons of Liberty*. Forge Books, 24.95, hardcover ISBN 765310414

Conspiring characters

Southern sympathy in a border city

The best stories take place on borders. Courts and capitals have their intrigues, but for fiction, nothing beats a city where enemies tip their hats to each other as they pass on the street. Baltimore was exactly that kind of place during the Civil War, a city that resisted any attempts to choose sides with a spiky integrity that made sense out of attacking Federal troops in 1861, while yet never abandoning the Union. Then, as now, Baltimore couldn't decide whether it was a southern town or part of the vast northeastern megalopolis, and that tension created a uniquely piquant air that Marie Jakober takes advantage of in her seventh novel, **Sons of Liberty**.

Set in 1862, before and during Lee's drive into Maryland, **Sons of Liberty** centers on Captain Branden Rolfe, a German immigrant who is now a Federal provost marshal. Brought to the States as an exile after the aborted European uprisings of 1848, he is bound to the cause of American democracy and Union, though the idea of serving as an agent of government takes some getting used to after all those revolutionary years. The Black German, as he is known, is a worldly, moustache-twirling type who loves the city for its complexity, and is therefore perfect to wind his way through its alleys and drawing rooms in search of conspirators, here, an aborning insurgency planned by the underground Sons of Liberty.

Along with Rolfe, Jakober follows a mysterious young Confederate widow named Eden Farnswood, who works her way into an established southern family and throws herself into the espionage perpetrated under its roofs. It's no surprise to reveal that the two threads weave together as Lee and Baltimore's possible

liberation to the Confederate Army comes closer.

Without question, Ms. Jakober is an experienced, talented writer. She creates a lively Baltimore and gives us two rich main characters in Rolfe and Farnswood. There are some clumsy stretches of exposition fobbed off as dialogue, a common pitfall of most historical novels, and Rolfe, bum leg and all, has positively Bond-like luck with the ladies, but these are forgivable in a historical thriller. What is harder to forgive is the lack of thrills. As engaging as the characters are, more action and less motivation would have gone a long way towards making this a more satisfying book. It's a credit to Ms. Jakober's skills that I didn't look up until I was more than two-thirds through to realize that remarkably little had happened since I had first seen Mrs. Farnswood. In 200 pages, she had met some chatty southern sympathizers and come to Baltimore to help them with some low-level border running; Rolfe was still circling around a vague threat of popular uprising from the Sons of Liberty, but mostly he'd been thinking about his tragic Euro-past. While the stakes for the nation are obviously very, very high throughout, the lives of Rolfe and Farnswood are never threatened all that much, therefore we stay at a remove and in a novel--and especially a thriller--if our breath doesn't catch a few times in fear or surprise, something's not working right. The German's character rings true and his interior development is compelling, but it wasn't enough to make up for the missing chase scene, the bullet whizzing past his head that I kept turning the pages in hopes of finding.

There are also the requisite paragraphs, both in dialogue and exposition, laying out all the moral complexities of the Civil War. The immediate urge is to dismiss them as leaden, unrealistic diatribes no actual human would ever speak and five or so years ago, that may have been true. But when I read them, I thought of my own conversations recently, among friends, over the butcher counter. Nowadays, in the course of things, we hear more than a few statements of position, and offer our own public attempts to figure out where we stand politically at a time when picking a side seems to be required. All of us who have ever wished that we'd lived at the time of the Civil War would be wise to take a measure of the high pitch of our own sincerity, how we now regularly show the darker parts of our nation's heart. Ms. Jakober's speeches are well considered, intelligent and pointed enough to annoy modern sympathizers of both sides, and in a few cases she has the skill to actually make plot points of the discussions rather than just toss them out there like op-ed pieces. Readers willing to connect the past to the present will surely hear echoes of these pages in the

rhetoric they hear on tonight's news. Making such connections is the work of historical novelists and she does it well.

If Ms. Jakober impresses Captain Rolfe back into duty, which I hope she does, I also hope she puts him--and us--on the line more so we can experience the war with him, not just learn about who he is.

Thomas Dyja is the author of three novels, Play for a Kingdom, Meet John Trow and The Moon in Our Hands, which will be reprinted in paperback by Carroll & Graf in February 2006.