

### COLUMN: Nonconventional Civil War Fiction

David Madden

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## Feature Essay

Winter 2016

**Madden, David** *COLUMN: Nonconventional Civil War Fiction.*

One of the first and still considered one of the finest major Civil War novels, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, appeared as early as 1867, was written by a Yankee officer who was an eyewitness, John William De Forest, and was set more on a Louisiana plantation than on a battlefield. More generally considered the pre-eminent classic is *The Red Badge of Courage*, published in 1895, by young Stephen Crane, who saw no war, but who saw and filched some passages of violence from De Forest's novel.

Hundreds of novels, some great, some awful, appeared in the twenty eight years between those two novels and thousands since Crane's novel, which is less a narrative about the American Civil War than it is about fear, cowardice, and courage in war per se. If those two novels failed Walt Whitman's, Edmund Wilson's, and Daniel Aaron's criteria for the great novel of the Civil War, which for them remained unwritten, they exemplify characteristics of such novels in their choice of predominant locals, the home front and the battle front, and in their being examples of the ironies and paradoxes that pervade the history of the Civil War novel.

As we meditate on this subject, we do well to be mindful of those novels published from the end of the war through the end of the Centennial: MacKinlay Kantor's *Long Remember*; Joseph Stanley Pennel's *The History of Rome Hanks and Kindred Matters*; Evelyn Scott's *The Wave*; Andrew Lytle's *The Long Night*; Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*; Mary Lee Settle's *Know Nothing*; Mary Johnston's *The Long Roll* and *Cease Firing*; Ellen Glasgow's *The Battle-Ground*; Ambrose Bierce's *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians (In the Midst of Life)* ; William Faulkner's *The Unvanquished*; and Ross Lockridge, Jr.'s, *Raintree County*.

Having read hundreds of Civil War novels and reviewed a good number right on up through 2015, I have come to several conclusions that may stimulate

thought about the past, the present, and the future of fiction that deals with the war. I am realizing just now that I can quite safely assert that in all the history of fiction worldwide no distinct body of work resembles the quantity, variety, and perhaps the quality of American Civil War literature in novel, short story, poetry, and drama forms.

Recently, thinking more often of the comparison between the four years of battles and the eight years of Reconstruction, I am convinced that the lasting legacy in many realms of American life makes the latter far more important, so that some of the most meaningful novels will include that era. Civil War historian and novelist, Shelby Foote started my meditations on that subject when he told me at a public event that, “the sins for which American can never atone is slavery and Reconstruction.” With that in mind, we may consider William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* a major novel of the Civil War because it focuses upon ante-bellum causes and Reconstruction effects from the perspective of the 1920’s, even though only a few pages are set on a battlefield. Perhaps not perversely, one may argue that the ante-bellum world of Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* presages certain themes of not only the war to come but also its Reconstruction aftermath. In a similar way of thinking, in *All the King’s Men*, Robert Penn Warren dramatizes and by the technique of implication interprets the war and Reconstruction by placing the long narrative of Cass Mastern’s Civil War trauma in the exact center of the novel, which is set during the Depression.

Southern and northern men and women have provided readers with many perspectives on the war. The Southern novel in general is a well-known literary phenomenon, partly because there is no such thing as a corresponding northern novel per se. That paradox has lured me into thinking that perhaps the historically rooted and complex southern sensibility is likely to have produced so far the most meaningful novels on the war and likely to write the greatest novel yet to come on the American Civil War. From that contention it is not too much further out on a limb to assert that every serious novel written by a southerner is by complex implication about the Civil War and Reconstruction.

In the fifty years since the end of the Centennial, a good many Civil War novels and a relative few Reconstruction novels—“They ain’t romantic,” said Shelby Foote—have appeared. Reader response is determined not only by the elements of fiction--character, plot, subject, and theme--but also by technique, whether omniscient or first person point of view and commensurate style,

complex or simple. Both southern and northern men and women continue to publish and the home front and the battle front continue to be among the locales, but a major, very encouraging difference between the fiction before about 1980 and the present time is innovation and a greater variety of subjects and themes, which are seen, somewhat to a lesser degree, also in nonfiction. Creative approaches include reimagining Civil War draft riots, Union espionage undertaken by a Richmond spinster, and opposing sides facing off in a game of newly invented baseball, as well as explorations of the war's ongoing impact as with a re-enactor who loses himself in the life of a soldier or a legend that Nathan Bedford Forrest's tactics influenced Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps during WWII. Civil War fiction, of course, can trace its renaissance to Michael Shaara's 1974 *Killer Angels*, but the following novels are among the best examples of continually emerging fresh perspectives: Robert H. Fowler's *Jim Mundy*, 1977; Richard Slotkin's *The Crater*, 1980; Allan Gurganus' *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, 1989; Stewart O'Nan's *A Prayer for the Dying*, 1999; S. C. Gylanders's *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, 2006; Kelby Ouchley's *Iron Branch, A Civil War Tale of a Woman In-Between*, 2011; and Jerome Charyn's *I Am Abraham: A Novel Of Lincoln And The Civil War*, 2014.<sup>1</sup>

From 1999 to 2015, the *Civil War Book Review* has reviewed almost every novel related to the war, 378 to be exact. A copy of each has been added to LSU library, which has a special collection dating from 1955; the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has a collection of fiction up to 1955. LSU also has the only collection of fiction and nonfiction written for children.

The only award for Civil War novels is the Michael Shaara Award, conceived at the United States Civil War Center in 1997, now at the Civil War Institute in Gettysburg. Because the focus of this piece is on innovative works, which is also the criteria for the Shaara Award, a list of the winners may prove helpful to readers who wish to explore possibilities.<sup>2</sup>

Making predictions about the future of Civil War fiction is riskier than making somewhat outrageous claims, such as a few of the above. But readers are certainly safe in hoping, perhaps expecting, to see works that deal with subjects and themes underdeveloped not only in fiction but in historical works. Among the many lawyers who proudly display histories of the war on their office shelves amidst the law tomes few if any have written novels with lawyers as protagonists caught up in legal issues and events. Readers might welcome more novels by people in the following professions and from the perspectives of

protagonists, male and female, who are professionals: doctors, teachers, preachers, geographers, biologists, zoologists, artists, musicians, actors, historians, poets, photographers, psychologists, athletes, engineers, especially bridge builders, financiers, journalists, anthropologists, lawmen, even dentists, optometrists, gravediggers, and novels by and about members of ethnic groups such as blacks, slave or free, Jews, Asians, Europeans.

A survey of Civil War fiction may convince some readers that Walt Whitman, Edmund Wilson, and Daniel Aaron were wrong in their assertions that no one has gotten the American Civil War into a single book, but let us consider that that vast, tangled subject has been thoroughly taken up collectively, a community exploration by southern and northern writers and their readers.

*David Madden's latest book is The Tangled Web of the Civil War and Reconstruction: Readings and Writings from a novelist's Perspective. At 83, Madden has published almost 60 books, including Sharpshooter, A Novel of the Civil War. Robert Penn Warren Professor of Creative Writing, Emeritus, he is founding director of the former U. S. Civil War Center and creator of the East Tennessee Civil War Alliance in his home state. He lives now in Black Mountain, North Carolina.*

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<sup>1</sup>The list of fascinating new themes and authors is too long to do justice, but some approaches that simply cannot go unmentioned are: Civil War draft riots; John Wilkes Booth; travel adventures of a rebellious young woman in Kansas just before the war; a Wisconsin town goes mad, symbolic of war's aftermath; the making of the Civil War president in his youth; a young Confederate soldier and a young mulatto slave girl experience the war together; Richmond spinster as Union spy; a re-enactor loses himself in the life of a soldier; Union and Confederate soldiers compete in a new game—baseball; a woman dressed as a boy becomes General Sherman's protégé; a great array of characters and settings during Reconstruction; a unique view of General Nathan Bedford Forrest; a half-Choctaw woman strives to find a wounded soldier in Louisiana; a small secret band of abolitionists in Dallas aid fugitive slaves; a prolific Jewish novelist's perspective on Lincoln in a fresh style; focus on the crater in the battle of Petersburg; an epic novel before, during, and after the war about an array of characters on both sides, north and south and in the West. Works deserving credit for this proliferation of themes include: Lawrence Wells', *Rommel and the*

*Rebel*, 1986; David Delman's *Ain't Goin' to Glory*, 1991; David Robertson's *Booth*, 1998; Jeff Shaara's *God's and Generals*, 1998; Jane Smiley's *The All-True Travels and Adventures of Lidie Newton*, 1998; Thomas Dyja's *Meet John Trow*, 2002; Kaye Gibbons's *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon*, 2005; Allen Wier's *Tahano*, 2006; E. L. Doctorow's *The March*, 2006; Donald McCaig's *Canaan*, 2007; Madison Smartt-Bell's *Devil's Dream*, 2009; Henry Chappell's *Silent We Stood*, 2013; John Mark Sibley-Jones's *By the Red Glare*, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>See Madison Jones, *Nashville 1864* (1997); Donald McCaig, *Jacob's Ladder: A Story of Virginia During the Civil War* (1998); Robert J. Mrazek, *Stonewall's Gold* (1999); Richard Slotkin, *Abe: A Novel of the Young Lincoln* (2000); Marly Youmans, *The Wolf Pit* (2001); Marie Jakober, *Only Call Us Faithful* (2002); Philip Lee Williams, *A Distant Flame* (2004); E.L. Doctorow, *The March* (2006); Howard Bahr, *The Judas Field* (2007); Donald McCaig, *Canaan* (2008); Nick Taylor, *Disagreement* (2009); Cornelia Nixon, *Jarrettsville* (2010); Robin Oliveira, *My Name is Mary Sutter* (2011); Sharon Ewell Foster, *The Resurrection of Nat Turner, Part One: The Witnesses* (2012); Peter Troy, *May the Road Rise Up to Meet You* (2013); and, Dennis McFarland, *Nostalgia* (2014). See also, "Michael Shaara Award for Excellence in Civil War Fiction," last modified December 31, 2014, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Shaara\\_Award\\_for\\_Excellence\\_in\\_Civil\\_War\\_Fiction#cite\\_note-winners-4](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Shaara_Award_for_Excellence_in_Civil_War_Fiction#cite_note-winners-4).