

The Winter Family

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Review

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Jackman, Clifford *The Winter Family*. Doubleday, \$25.95 ISBN 9780385539487

Bringing to Life War's Brutality

Clifford Jackman's new novel *The Winter Family* is a chilling mixture of tension, irony, beauty, terror, and brutality. His work calls to mind the historical fiction of John Williams, Tom Franklin, and Peter Matthiessen. Jackman's mostly spare style combined with the psychological complexity in its simple character studies are the perfect antidote to much historical fiction that purports to fictionalize history by presenting violence in events such as the Civil War as an abstraction performed by valorous political robots. For Jackman, figures such as General Sheridan are there to provide support to hierarchies of power, not to lament over the waste of human life.

The book begins with a brutal invasion of a small settlement in Oklahoma in 1889. The remnants of a flying patrol that served under William Tecumseh Sherman in the fabled march to the sea are now wanted outlaws, having been court martialed for murdering civilians in Georgia. They are contracted to kill a band of half-starved Native Americans but wind up attacking the town instead. The gang or family consists of August Winter, former Lieutenant Quentin Ross—a probable serial killer—and Bill Bread, the Empire brothers, and former slave Fred Johnson. Jackman's story-telling hums with precision as the book opens and he reveals just enough of the family's past with nuance and dread to give the reader an awful sinking feeling that these violent acts are merely a prelude to the cyclone that will be coming soon to everyone unlucky enough to meet them. In highly dramatic fashion, one of the family decides to rebel against Winter and fights to protect the town from the marauders. Jackman's opening attack suggests the wild uncertainties of frontier life and the failure of self-correction during Reconstruction.

The book then shifts to the Civil War, where August Winter is a spooky and mysterious army private helping to scout ahead of Sherman's march to Savannah. The violence in this section is a deliberate riposte to books and novels that romanticize and glorify war as an abstract yet necessary evil. In one chilling portrayal of the deliberate torture and murder of a family, Jackman lets loose just enough about the evil nature of Quentin Ross, and hence war, that reading through this part will cause readers to rise from their book and lock their doors. Locking doors, Jackman implies in this brutal part of his novel, will not keep out men like August Winter or Quentin Ross. Jackman deftly interrogates and interprets the violence in the Civil War section as the loosed violence of war, which no reliance on formalities, the communiques of commanders, or vagaries of honor will quell. The South is indeed rendered inert and victimized by these foragers. Yet, Winter himself is subject to similar violence and torture. In one appalling scene, he is nearly drowned by a variation of waterboarding which helps to humanize him and to exemplify the proposition that killers can become victims very quickly. In this world, nobody has the drop on anybody else for very long.

By humanizing Winter, Jackman proves that humans can act wickedly and can in turn be bombarded with wickedness. In one scene, dramatizing the brutality of Ross's actions, Jackman also humanizes this character, even in the worst moments of his psychopathy, by suggesting that memory itself during wartime is problematic. In fact, all of the killing Jackman presents in horribly grisly fashion is a metaphor for the falsity of glorified and romanticized notions of honor. Jackman pokes holes in this Whiggish interpretation of the Civil War and Reconstruction by showing how memories of war presented as just, necessary, inevitable, and as acts of, for, and by gentleman is not credible psychologically, socially, or historically.

The next section skips to Chicago in 1871, where the outlaws have been hiding from the law. The chapter begins with Noah Ross, a twin of Quentin, and an owner of several slaughterhouses and factories. He is well to do and has made out well by shorting insurance companies before the great fire and buying properties on the low. He contracts the family to "oversee" a political election, in order to prevent fraud against Republican candidates and voters. Later, General Sheridan shows up to entice Bill Bread, Sergeant Jan Muller, and others into working for Ross to obtain pardons. His espousal of a realpolitik solution to political corruption is at odds with other more hagiographic accounts of officer conduct during and after the war. Jackman has Sheridan in plain clothes, hiding

his own identity paradoxically by donning a more individualist set of modern attire. Sheridan counsels this group of hand picked killers that in order to earn their pardon they will have to do what earned them a court martial and death sentence after the war. Jackman convincingly covers his fictional Sheridan with a sheen of plausible deniability and even suggests that there is really not much difference between himself or the army and Ross, Winter, or the rest of the family.

In a fascinating move, Jackman demonstrates, by introducing the Tayloresque character of Noah Ross and his world of slaughter, how an industrializing city in postwar America actually works. The savage shaving and wholesale boiling of half living pigs is both honest in its depiction of a slaughterhouse in Chicago and a sad commentary on a dependence and fetishizing of an economy of scale and scope. For Ross and his employees, the pigs are transformed from “useless things” into varieties of products that can be counted, numbered, and produce a value or price. Jackman’s slaughterhouses and the corrupt Chicago style politics involving the gaming of political contests suggests the scholarly organizational hypothesis of Robert Wiebe; indeed, it appears to be an all out assault on the convictions, character, and modes of living of island communities. As such, men like Ross and the world they are producing render the Winter family not only outmoded but also ripe for sale by turning the whole into parts that will be consumed and disposed of in filthy gutters. There is an effectiveness to an emphasis on efficiency, Jackman posits, but there is also an emptiness about the endeavor that bests the worst wickedness of Winter, Ross, and the rest of the family.

Perhaps the only drawback to Jackman’s work comes in the final apocalyptic showdown in Oklahoma. Here, in describing the deaths of most of the family, his prose seems so spare as to be skeletal and reminiscent more of bald stage directions or a screenplay. And often the sentences appear to run out of steam and become very short accounts of actions. Though this may match the events, the style at the end appears to be less about conscious acts than of unfinished thoughts or overly truncated ideas. Though his writing was always crisp and cinematic, at the end Jackman appears to simply be rushing to get to the end of his work. With the final apocalypse, the end feels somewhat disjointed and turns the actions and thoughts and results of the preceding violence into individual bits or cyphers that appear to elude meaning.

Clifford Jackman's novel has been expertly plotted and his characters are ingeniously drawn. He is adept at providing just enough exposition to give coherence to the work and he manages tension and surprise as well as anybody working in films today. Jackman is familiar as well with the social, cultural, and historical world of the characters he has drawn. His world isn't populated by unconvincing political robots, and one gets the sense that he researched enough of the historical milieu to go beyond the official papers of commanding officers and read the sources from the bottom up.

Andrew Wollard is an independent scholar and writer with a research interest in grassroots and populist movements. He received his BA from the University of New Mexico and his MFA from the University of Alabama.