

Native Guard: Poems

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Review

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Trethewey, Natasha *Native Guard: Poems*. Houghton Mifflin Company, \$22.00 cloth ISBN 978061860430

Interpreting Southern Memory

Bold, Sincere, Thought-Provoking

Many people would not be shocked to hear that more than 80,000 white Mississippians fought for the Confederate cause during the Civil War. They might be surprised to find out that more than 17,000 black Mississippians fought for the Union. Similar numbers of blacks from other Southern states joined the Union cause. Among them were the soldiers of the second regiment of the Louisiana Native Guards, former slaves and refugees, who ultimately were assigned the task of guarding a Union prison for Confederate soldiers on Ship Island, just off the gulf coast of Mississippi.

Poet, writer, professor, and child of the tumultuous 1960s in Mississippi, Natasha Trethewey narrates the compelling story of the Native Guard, simultaneously weaving in her own personal narrative of life in the South as an individual with mixed parentage. The poems in the collection are honest, direct, and sometimes painful, but they are uniformly surprising and thought-provoking.

Trethewey draws on multiple sources, both personally and professionally. Clearly she is a student of the Agrarian tradition in Southern literature, quoting from Allen Tate and stating in the poem *Pastoral*, *In the dream, I am with the Fugitive Poets*. On the other hand, she also makes it clear in the poems to her mother, who was black, and the poems about the Native Guard, that her perceptions of her native South are anything but traditional in the Agrarian sense. In *Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi*, her description of a black family being forced at gunpoint to sing in order to pass to safe ground during a flood stings of conveniently forgotten oppression. Clearly, Trethewey is a postmodernist who is not afraid to confront social complexities.

On the other hand, she also appreciates the importance of historical context and the unavoidable pitfalls of hindsight. In her poetic eulogy to the Native Guard, a fictional narrator speaks of his duties on Ship Island and the Things which must be accounted for, including a real incident where white Union soldiers fired on their fellow black soldiers of the Native Guard as they retreated from a Confederate attack on the Mississippi mainland. In this poem Trethewey seems hesitant to make final judgment on anyone, stating instead that, Some names shall deck the page of history, as it is written on stone. Some will not. Additional historical information about the Native Guard appears in the notes at the end of the book.

While some critics might question the wisdom of attempting to reconcile several radically different perspectives of interpreting recent Southern memory, Trethewey attempts to sidestep the issue by simply being sincere. Almost brashly, she claims her mixed heritage as it is, noting that it was illegal for her white father and black mother to marry in Mississippi at that time (1965), and then proceeds to examine her accumulated life experience with candor, compassion, and more than a trace of melancholy. Taking flowers to her mother as a child in *Genus Narcissus*, she proclaims, I knew nothing of Narcissus or the daffodil's short spring. Her mother's spirit haunts the poems in this collection.

Later in *Southern Gothic*, she recalls the expression on her father's face when he hears about the schoolyard names his daughter is called and simply notes that Wordsàtake shape outside us. Her attempt to straddle perspectives that seem innately in conflict is by definition awkward but never insincere.

In dealing with the awkwardness of her position, Trethewey brings to bear a particular gift, combining the investigative curiosity of a historian with the wordsmithing of a poet. This is, however, far from a history text. Those reading this book and seeking fresh information or new insights about the War will perhaps be disappointed but not without discovering an unexpected reward. They will encounter instead an open examination of the messy, sometimes unpleasant, but incredibly rich panoply that was and is the American South. With many fewer words than the novelist, much more emotion than the historian, and a tinge of irreverent boldness, Trethewey manages to capture a meaningful and fresh glimpse of what too often has been left to stereotypes.

Jack Trammell teaches and administrates at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. He has published nine books, including three collections of poetry and a Civil War novel entitled Gray (Xlibris Corporation, ISBN 0738821691, \$18.69 softcover). He can be reached at jacktrammell@yahoo.com.