

### By the Red Glare: A Novel

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## Review

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**Sibley-Jones, John Mark** *By the Red Glare: A Novel*. University of South Carolina Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9781611173994

### A Fictional Mosaic of a City in Sherman's Path

John Mark Sibley-Jones begins *By the Red Glare* with such startling images, both literally and symbolically powerful, that quoting a passage will serve to suggest a narrative unique in Civil War novels:

The tree to which Jim Wells was chained stood dead center in the front yard of his father's sprawling plantation in Greenville. For nine years the declivities of earth surrounding the tree had provided shelter for young Wells. His father had put him there. Mr. Wells told his wife it was the safest place for their deranged son... The only creature on the plantation that showed Jim any human kindness was Rachel, a half-wit slave born on the plantation eighteen years earlier... . Except for the difference in the color of their skin they might have passed for siblings.

When his mother whines that she cannot tolerate Jim's wailing, her husband takes the lash to him, triggering Rachel's wailing. He whips her, too, reciting key lines from the Bible that authorize the punishment. He blames his son's and Rachel's and the other slave's actions on his failure to be devout enough to set an example for them of Christian behavior. Sibley-Jones illustrates the husband's attitude, "Oh, the heartache caused by equating the behavior of Negroes to that of his own flesh and blood. Witnessing his father's violent punishment of Rachel, Jim imagined sinking his teeth into his father's neck, as he had seen wild dogs do to each other."

The rest of the novel is vivid enough, in characters, relationships, incidents, as Columbia, South Carolina awaits General Sherman's arrival on his scorched-earth march to the sea during the severe winter of 1864-1865, and endures the famous burning of that capital city. Many scenes are set at Columbia

Hospital, overflowing with wounded soldiers, including a Union combatant, and at the nearby lunatic asylum where 1200 federal prisoners are captive. The insane and the federal soldiers conspire and escape as Sherman's army is about to invade. The role of the insane enhances the roles of military wounded and slaves as a trinity symbolizing Civil War.

By breaking up this 236 page novel into 56 short chapters, the author is able to maintain a steady narrative pace. The chapters are devoted to almost a dozen characters, returning to each about ten times, but to Joseph Crawford, a hospital steward, most frequently, especially in the last 100 pages. The characters are representative of that city: black and white men and women, free and enslaved, sane and insane, and confederate and unionists civilians and soldiers, including historical figures, such as General James Chestnut and his wife Mary Boykin Chestnut (famous for her published diary). In addition to Jim and Rachel, among other characters are Big David, a runaway slave, Crawford, the rather unstable hospital steward whose behavior is determined by shifting, conflicting attitudes about the war, Meredith Simpson, the woman he adores, Mrs. Louisa Cheeves McCord, extreme secessionist who nurses as a domineering volunteer at the hospital, and Dr. Parker, chief medical officer. Sibley-Jones traces those lives, isolated, literally or effectively, along parallel tracks that dramatically cross.

A long-time English teacher and first-time novelist, Sibley-Jones is not quite yet the master of prose commensurate with the historical importance of that crucial event or his ambitious imagination. In addition to the usual stock phrases that the omniscient point of view too readily generates, this example of his style is typical: "The woman's shoulders drew inward and she lowered her head like a turtle seeking the protection of her shell." Two examples of his lunges at high style are descriptions of a face "imprinted on the canvas of his memory" and "only his agnostic eyes betrayed the attempt at bravery." The omniscient point of view generates such arbitrary lines as this one: "Jim's mouth widened into what might have passed for a smile." To whom?

He indulges in such clichés as "such were the brutal demands of war." Even so, the author gives us insights such as this one: "how strange it seemed to Joseph that the mineral [nitric acid] pulled from the earth to make explosives for the Confederacy was also used to heal." And effective end-of-chapter images such as this one: "Parker trudged toward his newest patient, whose arms stretched wide to measure the circumference of his new home."

Sibley-Jones does not avoid another problem to which the omniscient point of view lends itself. Too early, he doles out blatant, excessive exposition, introduced by such perfunctory phrases as "True to his word, when Joseph first arrived in Columbia...," thus impeding the pace. Mechanical descriptions introduce characters. "Thompson was average height... while Joseph's thin frame was well proportioned" is followed by descriptions of the hair of each. The characters "marvel," and do things "presently."

Even so, for a goodly company of readers, events leading up to the burning of Columbia and the burning itself may prove intrinsically so interesting that this novel will satisfy an on-going need for unusual Civil War narratives set beyond the battlefield.

The ending is as exhilarating as the opening is shocking. Rachel and another rebellious slave start a run for freedom. "Their laughter rumbled like the echo of thunder through the charnels of the smoldering city. Joseph closed his eyes and imagined the two mad creatures on a romp, viewing the desecration as though it were a burnt offering, a sacrifice appointed for their glee."

*David Madden is the author of Sharpshooter: A Novel of the Civil War and ten other novels. The Tangled Web of the Civil War and Reconstruction, an innovative collection of essays and fiction, will appear in the fall of 2015. His fourth book of stories is The Last Bizarre Tale.*