

Shades of Gray: A Novel of the Civil War in Virginia

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Recommended Citation

Trammell, Jack (2009) "Shades of Gray: A Novel of the Civil War in Virginia," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol11/iss1/15>

Review

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Winter 2009

James, Jessica *Shades of Gray: A Novel of the Civil War in Virginia*. Patriot Press, \$21.99 softcover ISBN 9780979600005

A Civil War Love Story

The American Civil War is easily one of the nation's most dramatic and complicated stages upon which writers of fiction can aspire to perform. Author Jessica James takes up the literary challenge in a sweeping novel, *Shades of Gray*, which is ultimately a classic love story as much as it is a war story, set in the hills and valleys of Virginia during the war years.

The protagonist, Andrea Evans, is a seventeen year old hellion who dresses as a man and fights for the Union cause as a scout. She is stubborn, contrary, and easily distractible. On one of her forays, she crosses swords with the gallant Confederate Captain Alexander Hunter, a wealthy landowner and natural leader of men who commands his own cavalry battalion. After narrowly escaping his wrath, she unexpectedly turns back and saves him from drowning after he falls. Thus begins a relationship that can only be characterized as stormy, cantankerous, but ultimately and sometimes inexplicably romantic and compelling. The reader cannot help but recognize the "Taming of the Shrew" archetype, though James by no means relies solely on that plotline. There are other lovers, enemies, many heroes and villains, and somehow Andrea and Alex's paths continue to cross with bemusing regularity. They eventually fall in love, in spite of the outward antipathy they often present to each other, or display for the consumption of others.

Although far from great literature in the classic sense, the novel is reasonably tightly constructed. The prose is generally short and sparse, but adequate. The strongest section of the book—the middle third—involves the growing intimacy between Evans and Hunter as she unwillingly recuperates at his Virginia mansion from injuries incurred while a prisoner of war in Libby

Prison in Richmond. Each time Hunter returns briefly on leave, their fiery relationship resumes and grows more complex. At a certain point they each realize that she is well enough to leave, and yet she doesn't.

James is perhaps overly sentimental in her portrayal of the mixed loyalties and tensions that torment her characters, both Northern and Southern. However, the "discussions" (or arguments) Evans and Hunter have about the war are quite revealing in relationship to how the war is perceived now, and how Americans have made peace since that time.

The historical accuracy of the book is adequate, holding much entertainment value especially in regard to the role of horses, which are also major characters in the story. Both Evans and Hunter are horsemen par excellent. From a strictly literary perspective, however, there are dangerous flirtations with stale stereotypes (Marauding Yankee and Cavalier Rebel), and some repetition in the use of plot devices (the reader is perhaps given too many examples of a particular act of obstinacy on the part of Evans).

Still, the book must be called an entertaining read, and moves quickly through the second half. Though the coincidences are sometimes hard to believe, it is worth remembering that brother did really fight against brother, and women did dress as men and fight in the Civil War. As incredible as many occurrences in the story are, the historical reality was often no less strange and unpredictable. All in all, James should be commended for her effort.

Jack Trammell teaches at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. Among his publications are the Civil War novel Gray, and a forthcoming book entitled, The Least, the Last, and the Lost.