

Civil War Book Review

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My Name Is Mary Sutter

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Review

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Oliviera, Robin *My Name is Mary Sutter*. Viking, \$26.95 ISBN 978-670-02167-3

Midwife Melodrama

It is possible to write a novel about the Civil War without a battle scene or an appearance by Abraham Lincoln, and I wish Robin Oliviera had done that. Clearly a talented writer, she could have made her first novel *My Name is Mary Sutter* a straight melodrama, a historical drama, or what I was hoping for, something with serious literary aspirations, but instead she's tried to be all things to all people and given us a well-intentioned book that does everything it's supposed to do, except transport the reader.

Our heroine, Mary Sutter, is a brilliant and headstrong young midwife in Albany who wants to become a surgeon. After bailing out insipid Dr. James Blevens during a botched delivery, she asks him for help towards her dream, which he refuses to give because he's a man of his sexist times and, well, he's insipid. Outside, newsboys scream about Fort Sumter—the war begins! Mary's pursuit of her dreams takes her to Washington, where she's turned aside by a crusty Dorothea Dix assembling her nursing corps, and then onto the Union Hotel Hospital, an imploding hellhole of disease and medical ignorance run manfully by Dr. William Stipp, who agrees to let her stay on to help. As Stipp is falling in love with Mary and sharing his amputation skills, she's still mooning about Thomas Fall, the laconic (and dopey) neighbor who's married her twin sister Jenny and then gone to war with their brother Christian, leaving Jenny alone for her confinement. Blevens is made a sanitary officer during the build-up to the first battle of Bull Run; Christian dies, possibly at the hands of a man whose wife left him because she met Christian while delivering at the Sutter home. Blevens of course loves Mary, but he has a wife and anyway Mary's not so keen on him anyway because he's generally useless. Despite her mother's entreaties, Mary delays her return to Albany for Jenny's delivery, arriving just in

time to see her sister die. Guilt-ridden but still determined to serve, she then goes back to the front where she reunites with Stipp at Antietam, as well as Thomas Fall, who's gravely injured. That autumn she brings Fall back to Albany to recuperate and, it seems, to marry him. Years later, the war ended, Stipp comes to find Mary, who has indeed become a surgeon but she didn't marry Fall, leaving Stipp and our heroine to end up together.

My Name is Mary Sutter could have been a compelling novel about a woman plunging herself into war; unfortunately Ms. Oliviera pulls herself up short from creating Mary's reality. Instead of allowing Mary's life to unfold against the war, she inserts it *into* the war, thus reducing it to a function of history. The whole thing rushes ahead with lots of action and saying and moving, but little felt emotion on the part of the reader. Mary, an excellent if chilly character, has enough in her to warrant an appearance on most every page, but we spend way too much time with the men, all of whom are written in varying shades of Ashley Wilkes; damp, arrogant, and ultimately hapless. Not that the author is being in any way misanthropic—there's just not much interesting about any of them. Stipp's the best of the lot, but only by default. Spending pages with them feels like time wasted when we could be back with Mary.

Worst are the scenes featuring Dorothea Dix, Lincoln and his generals and the like, which take us completely out of the novel's reality. Every writer of historical fiction faces the choice of whether they'll use real historical figures and, further, whether they'll go into their heads. There's no right answer and Ms. Oliviera doesn't embarrass herself. It simply feels like she's doing it to fulfill the requirements of Historical Fiction; there are no new angles, no new ways of seeing people who are already very familiar. The glancing encounter usually says more in these cases.

Pacing exacerbates all this. Too much feels compulsory. There's nothing wrong with the arc of the story; it goes by too fast for us to experience the war, the pain, the loss on the personal level of her characters. We don't know them well enough, we don't care about them enough. Sometimes, more is more, for instance: Christian and the angry husband. Regiments were indeed made up of people who knew each other, so the possibility of a spurned husband and the man he's been spurned for marching south together is entirely plausible. But here, it comes off as creaky and forced because everything is so compressed; the necessary coincidences of fiction (and life) are merely the next plot point and lose their emotional impact. All those obligatory scenes of Lincoln huffing about

McClellan's incompetence would have been better spent on slowing this whole thing down and letting Mary and her circle really come to life. Unfortunately, little in this book seems natural and self-occurring because it's not sure whether to be an out and out melodrama or something literary. And as a melodrama, it lacks juice. Mary's conflicts aren't of the melodramatic sort; she's not bed hopping or breaking hearts, there's nothing deliciously wicked or especially gut-wrenching aside from Jenny's death, but she's set up for it from the beginning, like the first girl down the basement stairs in a horror movie.

The thing is, Robin Oliviera is an excellent writer. Her prose is rich, she can write a crisp scene, she can find the telling detail. She cares about her characters, maybe even a little too much. Something tells me there's a real artist behind *My Name is Mary Sutter*. I hope for her next novel, one I look forward to reading, Ms. Oliviera stops worrying about what readers "require" in a story and instead take the time to create her own world for us to lose ourselves in.

Thomas Dyja is author of Play for a Kingdom and Walter White: The Dilemma of Black Identity in America.