Rediscovering Civil War Classics: The Shattered Dream of Childhood

David Madden

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Feature Essay

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**Madden, David** *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: The Shattered Dream of Childhood.*

I conceived this column in a dream early one morning and I am writing it soon after.

In Faulkner's imagination in *The Bear*, America was an Edenic dream baptized in its childhood in the nightmare of slavery and revolution and finally shattered in the Civil War and Reconstruction. The clearest expressions in literature of the shattering of the dream of innocent childhood are Civil War novels and short stories.

Through the eyes of a member of the poor white trash class, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* depicts antebellum race and class attitudes and practices that set the stage for the Civil War. The word adventures proves ironic as Huck encounters evidence on all levels of society that Human beings can be awful cruel to one another and It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race. On a raft on the Mississippi, he escapes from bondage to his drunken father and helps Jim escape from slavery; the raft becomes a kind of idyllic refuge from civilization as they encounter one nightmare after another when they need to go ashore and when two of the worst of men invade their raft.

Huck is told that if he helps a slave escape, he will go to hell. He replies, All right then I will go to hell, as if it couldn't be worse than his adventures ashore and afloat. When he rejects the sivilized life Aunt Sally offers him, he lights out for the Territory ahead of the rest of westering people. That, too, proves cruelly ironic when we call to mind what the rest bring into the West, especially after the Civil War and Reconstruction. We can imagine that Tom Sawyer's temperament could have attracted him to fight on either side; some evidence exists that he ended up hanged.

One of the starkest depictions of the ugliness of Civil War battle as seen in its immediate aftermath is Ambrose Bierce's short story Chickamauga, a major
Western theater battle site. From his usual omniscient point of view, but focused upon a six year old boy's perceptions [mostly misperceptions] of the dead and dying as he wanders over the battlefield, Bierce imagined a symbolic child of the war: he is deaf and dumb, so he slept through the thunder of battle and can never speak of the nightmare to which he awakens. War was a glorious dream of heroism for him until he saw, by the light of a distant fire, a stream suffused with blood into which wounded soldiers had plunged their heads to drink; too weak to raise their heads again, they drowned. Drawn to the light, he discovers the blazing ruin of a building; he feeds the fire with fallen branches until he impulsively adds his wooden sword. Then he realizes that it is his own house that is burning, and then by that raging fire light he finds the body of his mother who was probably raped by retreating soldiers. âthe long dark hair in tangles and full of clotted blood. The greater part of the forehead was torn away, and from the jagged hole the brain protruded, overflowing the temple, a frothy mass of gray, crowned with clusters of crimson bubblesûthe work of a shell.

To Bierce, who had been a very young soldier himself, who survived a bullet that entered his head, swirled around his cranium, exited the other side, the war was a holocaust of ironies and paradoxes that forged an adult supremely cynical. The child moved his little hands, making wild, uncertain gestures. He uttered a series of inarticulate and indescribable criesûsomething between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkeyûstartling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil. The child was a deaf mute. Then he stood motionless with quivering lips, looking down upon the wreck. Is that passage Bierce's symbolic expression of the gibberish of Reconstruction rhetoric, North and South in origin, and prophetic of our own time, this spacey, spaced out space age, this age also of nature-made hurricanes and man-made after-effects?

About fifty years after Bierce's story appeared in his collection, In the Midst of Life, William Faulkner's Huck Finn-like novel, The Unvanquished (1938) told the story of two twelve year old boys who grow older, in many ways, during the war, a white kid and his friend, a black kid, whose dream life in the edenic wilderness of the Vicksburg region was shattered by what they witnessed. Twain does not let Huck tell us how the horrors he witnessed affected his later life, except by implicationûthat he felt a compulsion to tell his story. When he is an old man, Faulkner's poor white boy tells the story, the most haunting event, the mass exodus of freed slaves who follow the union army; at the river, the soldiers and the boy's own granny beat back the freed blacks, many of whom drown.
The boys also witness individual acts of cruelty: and then we saw the thing hanging over the middle of the road from a limb. It was an old Negro man, with a rim of white hair and with his bare toes pointing down and his head on one side like he was thinking about something quiet.

And they watch the transformation of an adolescent young southern belle into an astonishingly aggressive soldier, who then reverts to her status as a southern woman as her kinfolk sivilize her, shucking off the uniform and, in defeat, huddling into a long dress. As a boy and as a man, actively engaged in events, the narrator is witness to both war and reconstruction, during which he kills a man.

Always, Faulkner makes much of the power of the southern oral storytelling tradition. In Absalom, Absalom (1939), he shows the emasculating effect, post-reconstruction, upon a young southern gentleman of a lifetime of listening to many men like the narrator of The Unvanquished and lost women who keep the flame of the Lost Cause burning in decaying mansions.

None of these fictive boys who survive immersion, physical and psychological, in the Civil War, the War Between the States, who surrender in old age to a compulsion to tell their stories, express a radical change in their point of view, such as one might well expect from the deaf mute child in Chickamauga, and the various children in Evelyn Scott's myridminded epic The Wave (1929). Other novels in which old men do not show change of heart or mind to any significant degree are The Fathers (1938) by the Fugitive poet and Agrarian Allen Tate and quite recently Nashville: 1861 (1997), winner of the first Michl Shaara Award, by Madison Jones. In the first novel, a boy witnesses mistreatment of a black man, and in the second novel, when a white boy and a black boy, friends, plunge into the battle, seeking the white boy's father, the black boy is killed.

Out of an acute awareness of that pattern in Civil War narrations by old men about their childhood exposures, I conceived a different approach in my own novel Sharpshooter (1996). I worked from the premise of the narrator of The Unvanquished when he says there is a limit to what a child can accept, assimilate. My narrator was first of all a child when he was a sharpshooter; he understood so little of what went on around him in many battles, that he felt later on that he missed the war. He spends the rest of his long life, from war into Reconstruction and on into the Depression, writing his way back into the many
horrors of the war only to realize in the end that he had repressed the event that shattered his dream of the war: his shooting, from the guard tower at Andersonville Prison, the Union black soldier who had taught him how to read and write and who had impulsively crossed the deadline, as if to escape.

His innocent stare into the cross-hairs of his telescopic sharpshooter's lens from the tower high above the battlefield abruptly turns into the soul's shocked awareness, and is symbolic for us of the prolonged, delayed effect of the shattering of the dream of childhood in war. Reading those works of fiction we may imagine the mind set of those children as they grew into adulthood in the real world of reconstruction and became old folks during the depression.

In all of the above examples, a black child or young black man is a witness living a nightmare already, with a voice in these novels merely implied by what the white witness tells us in old age.

A witnessing child's innocent stare is a common element in many of the prominent southern novels and short stories set in the depression, a legacy of the war: Faulkner's That Evening Sun, Carson McCullers' The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Truman Capote's Other Voices, Other Rooms, and Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird.

In all these novels, by Southern writers and set in the south, the dream is a metaphor of an ideal that is shattered into nightmare from which we are only now beginning to awaken.

Less known to serious students of the Civil War are the many novels by Northerners as well as Southerners written for children that depict the effect of the war upon children, wrenched out of the ideal dream of antebellum life into the nightmare of war, mostly set in the South, and more prolonged nightmare of Reconstruction. These novels, about 50 each years, often take up issues not dealt with in adult novels.

A decade ago, the United States Civil War Center created a unique collection of books written for children about the Civil War, which is housed in Hill Memorial, the special collections Library at Louisiana State University.

In recent issues of Civil War Book Review, see: How I Found the Strong: A Novel of the Civil War, Cassie's Sweet Berry Pie, Almost To
Freedom, and Sarah's Ground.

*Founding Director of the United States Civil War Center and creator of the Civil War Book Review, David Madden is the author of a Civil War novel, Sharpshooter.* His other Civil War books are *Classics of Civil War Fiction, Beyond the Battlefield, Thomas Wolfe's Civil War, Losses of the Sultana* and *Reminiscences of Survivors.* Author of many essays, columns, and book reviews on the war, he teaches a course in Civil War Literature and is preparing a book on that subject and another on Civil War Throughout History. The Civil War is a stark threat that runs through his forthcoming collection of essays *Touching the Web of Southern Novelists* and through a forthcoming book about his works, *David Madden: A Writer for all Genres.*