

## The March

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## Review

Pulliam, June

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**Doctorow, E. L.** *The March*. Random House, \$25.95 ISBN 375506713

### Humanizing Sherman

A vision of Sherman's March to the Sea

*The March* is one of several recent Civil War novels that have attempted to humanize General Sherman, a figure generally characterized as a crazed arsonist, at least by southerners. This effect is achieved in two ways: through giving the reader a privileged view of the man himself and through the eyes of other characters, some of whom never even meet the general, but are nevertheless affected by his presence. Doctorow's Sherman is not a man who orders the sacking and burning of every city his army invades, but rather, a consummate soldier who does his duty, marching his troops through Georgia and the Carolinas to eventually join with General Grant's troops in Washington, D. C. The pillaging and subsequent burning of entire cities happen, not so much out of his demonic desire to pursue a scorched earth policy, but rather, as a natural consequence of the difficulties inherent in handling 60,000 troops and an increasing number of camp followers that swell his army's ranks with every city they invade. Doctorow shows Sherman trying to manage this shifting colossus, doing things such as issuing a proclamation that much of South Carolina should be given over to black resettlement and each homesteader should be given 40 acres and a mule in order to disengage some of the former slaves who have been following his army. This proclamation is issued not due to any abolitionist sentiment on Sherman's part, but rather, as a desperate attempt to persuade to remain some of the freed slaves who have attached themselves to his army. Sherman differentiates himself from the officers in his command through his love of soldiering, and of life on the move with his troops. While others under his command prefer to appropriate quarters in the finest homes in each city they visit, Sherman prefers sleeping in camp.

Though General Sherman is a character in this novel, we learn more about him, and of the effects of his campaign, though others, most of whom never even see the general. Similar to Doctorow's best known novel *Ragtime*, *The March* is told through the perspectives of both male and female characters of various races and classes. Pearl, a freed slave whose skin is so pale she can pass for white, meets with Mattie, her former mistress and sort of step-mother during the march, and the two forge an uneasy relationship when she must care for her former owner's wife who has been driven to a nervous break down by the loss of her husband and sons. Dr. Wrede Sartorius, a German born physician in the service of the Union Army, cares for the wounded with the same detached and precise bedside manner he uses when making love. Emily Thompson, former southern belle and daughter of a judge, is so impressed with Dr. Sartorius's efficiency and ability to cure that she leaves her Georgia home to follow him as his nurse. General Kil Kilpatrick, who sees the war as no reason to deny himself all the pleasures of the flesh, is ultimately humiliated by a mother/daughter pair of patrician southern women. And Will and Arly, two Confederate privates who serve as the novel's comic relief for the first half of the story, continually switch affiliations in an attempt to be on the side of the war most beneficial to their health. But Will and Arly are unfailingly a day late and a dollar short in this department and nearly always end up in the stockade. Coalhouse Porter, the African-American pianist from *Ragtime* even appears briefly.

Doctorow's motley cast of characters also underscore the oft-repeated Civil War maxim, the bottom rail is on the top. Nearly everyone crosses a once firmly established boundary, or is pushed into making this transition. Wealthy planters become penniless when their slaves abandon them, and the army pillages and burns their goods. Former slaves are now free, but to do what, they don't know. To avoid being raped, Pearl at first passes as a Union drummer boy, and later, towards the novel's conclusion, is preparing to pass for white in her new life with her Irish soldier lover.

But perhaps the most significant character is that of Josiah Culp, a photographer licensed by the United States Army because the government recognizes that for the first time in history war will be recorded for posterity. Culp is a minor character, who dies fairly quickly, but is important to the story as someone who can give 21st century readers a direct connection between their own time and this one. Anyone wishing to see the War first hand can easily find on-line the battle-field photographs of Matthew Brady and enter into the illusion that time has been frozen, and reality has been preserved. But the superiority of

the photograph in preserving reality is an illusion. The photograph can give no more objective or complete event of accounts than we could otherwise glean from diaries, letters, or newspaper articles. Still, Culp and his wagon of photographic equipment serve to legitimate the fictional narratives of other characters and give them a real historical feel that is tied to an artifact that all of us are able to easily access in the 21st century. In this way, the character of Culp is much like Doctorow's character Baron Ashkenazy in *Ragtime*, the fin de siècle filmmaker whose movies predict the Our Gang comedies, and who also works in a medium privileged to create a real document of history.

*June Pulliam teaches courses in Civil War Literature, horror fiction, and Women's and Gender Studies at Louisiana State University. She is also the editor of Necropsy: The Review of Horror Fiction ([www.lsu.edu/necrofile](http://www.lsu.edu/necrofile)).*