

Kindly Welcome: A Novel of the Shakers in the Civil War

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Review

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Stevens, Linda. *Kindly Welcome: A Novel of the Shakers in the Civil War.*
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Linda Stevens has written a finely crafted novel which makes the reader feel kindly welcome, indeed. She renders the story with compassion and empathy in a way that gives us a clear view into the interior of a people and the impact of a world-changing event. Her focus on a specific historical Shaker community (in which many of the characters are also historical) is the product of a good deal of research, and this rigor enriches the text of the novel. She even supplies a map of the town of South Union, Kentucky, one of a number of Shaker communities that stayed linked by organizational ties and correspondence. The seamless tranquility of this settlement is nearly overwhelmed by the advent of the Civil War, simply because the village is located in a border state rife with internecine warfare and sectional hatreds. These hatreds eventually overflow into of their lives in focused and bloody violence.

Stevens does not overload the novel with too much trivia concerning the Shaker (United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming) religion, since the reader gathers most of it in context. Their divisions into "families," their communal work and economic system, their singular form of worship giving rise to their nickname, their distinctive generosity and acceptance to all others, their doctrinal mandate to love and care for one another, their care to remain apart from the world—and their uncompromising pacifism and political indifference—all serve important functions in the plot.

The story follows three characters, principally little Amos Anger (an ironic choice of surname), and the two men who become his mentors and big brothers, Austin Innes and Harry Littlebourne. Littlebourne is a silent young man, half Indian, raised by a Quaker father in an isolated area of Ohio, where he grows up with nearly no contact with the outside world. After the father's death, young Harry gives away his farm to a westward-moving family in need. He heads down the road with his father's Bible and his horse into Kentucky until he happens on the

community at South Union, and finds himself kindly welcome. Laconic, shy, and gentle to a fault, Harry finds a home there, where his passion for hard work and making things grow can make him feel at home. Austin Innes is a rowdy, hard-drinking, red-headed steamboatman who “prided himself that he never slept alone when he went ashore, never slept twice in the same bed, and was never asked to pay.” He finds himself stranded in Natchez-under-the-Hill as his steamboat heads downriver without him, so he falls in with a crew of Shaker men who are taking a flatboat of goods downriver, figuring to catch up with his steamer in New Orleans. But along the way, he is attracted by the Shakers’ gentle mode of living and freedom from vice, and finds himself eventually at South Union, Kentucky, hungering for a simpler life. He takes on cobbling for the community and, quickly becoming the childrens’ favorite storyteller, he becomes the schoolteacher also.

Amos Anger is a small boy who has been abandoned at the Shaker village, leaving young Amos to struggle with his identity and the puzzle of who he belongs to, in spite of the Shaker living style that does not follow the biological family. But Amos is distraught and adrift, and the Elders ask Harry Littlebourne to take particular notice and care of the boy—a startling challenge for the painfully shy young man. He soon finds Amos is as necessary to his own happiness as he is to the boy’s. Austin Innes, as the schoolteacher, also becomes a role model and confidante to Amos.

The story, once all of these pieces are in place, follows the boy through the years leading up to the Civil War, and during. Since South Union is in a bitterly divided border state, and lies along the one of the main routes and railroads from Louisville down to Nashville: this is the main route for Union invasion and supply of their western armies, and for Confederate cavalry raiders, including Nathan Bedford Forrest, who stops in South Union and even meets young Amos. The Shakers shelter and employ a number of free blacks; along with their well-known opposition to slavery, this makes them less popular with the local slave owners.

The war will not let the Society alone. As troops from both armies pass along the road, the Shakers find themselves in an uncomfortable position: they feel obligated to feed anyone who asks for food, and so they do—and neither side can understand their firm pacifism. It is also clear that their proslavery neighbors resent their antislavery sentiments. These sentiments likewise puzzle the Union forces, who cannot understand why Shakers will not fight to free the slaves. Armies camp on the Shaker land, and their animals eat up the village’s forage. The

troops, prone to forage food, simply ask the Shakers, who always provide, baking and serving. The soldiers take their animals and burn up all of their fence rails for fuel. After battles, wounded men flood the countryside in emergency hospitals. After a few years, this wears down the Shakers' ability to keep their farm economically viable, and the losses from feeding both armies mount up. Constant uncertainty over the draft status of Shaker men is also a trial. The fallout of the war also leads to the climax of the story and a brief spate of murders that leaves the village with their own devastation.

Members of the community are caught in the violence they eschew. Austin Innes is torn in his feelings, and his anti-slavery feelings win out over his pacifism, and he joins the Union army, much to the Shakers' disappointment and Amos' grief. Austin does return, though, and finds healing in re-joining the Shaker way. Harry Littlebourne's gentle heart is no match for the random violence that takes him down, and Amos is left with few answers about the foundation of his life.

Stevens writes in an intriguing style that is self-conscious of its own formality, harking back to an earlier idiom, thus giving this book a nostalgic flavor. One character is "cursing in the terms that come easily to those who blaspheme with fluency." The tact and delicacy of the diction, as well as the subtle humor, clashes with the expectations of readers who are used to language less decorous and more abrupt. It is an appealing effect. Perhaps this is inspired by the Shakers' own "plain style" found in much American-made religious rhetoric, but I feel that Stevens' copious research into the Shaker journals from this town influenced her style with a narrative idiom more conducive to the setting and the times. Austin Innes is a mixed bag, in his earlier days, prone to womanizing and fighting and yet capable of tenderness and kindness; we are told confidentially that "when his captains didn't hanker after killing him they quite liked him." The narrator describes the 1861 secession with this metaphor: "The Southern exposure of the House Divided had some fifteen apartments, and by late winter half of them had been vacated by tenants who no longer found the accommodation acceptable." Another sentence eloquently exposes Kentucky's peril at the war's outset: "At the back of Kentucky's slow-burning stove, then, on the burner next to the soup stirred by a brown-skinned hand, still stood the question of secession, and it was soon bubbling fit to boil." The style draws you in, and you will find yourself absorbed in the story and the vividly-drawn characters without noticing how.

Stevens also refreshingly refuses to do the predictable. She takes the Shakers at face value—at their own word, so to speak. There is no salacious hinting at sexual improprieties or at the tensions and frustrations of living the Shakers' famed practice of celibacy. Her treatment of her topic is sympathetic and respectful. We get a close look at the inner workings of Shaker life, and the way that the Civil War roughly used anyone who got in its way. Stevens' characters are distinct and believable, and their essential humanity gives this novel substance and range.

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