

The Hidden Light of Northern Fires

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Review

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Wang, Daren. *The Hidden Light of Northern Fires*. Picador/St. Martin's Press, \$16.00 ISBN 9781250122353

New York Town Secedes from the Union in 1861

Daren Wang is not the first author to write a Civil War novel, but he is one of the few to get a review in these august pages. *Hidden Light* is his first novel, but Wang has written for *The Atlantic Journal-Constitution*, *Paste*, and *Five Points* magazine. Additionally, he is the founding executive director of the Decatur Book Festival. Such an active mind was imprinted with an interest in history at an early age when he and his family actually moved to Town Line, New York.

Town Line holds the unusual reputation of being the only town in New York (or anywhere else) to secede from the Union. According to oral history, in 1861, 125 men gathered in an informal meeting at a local schoolhouse. There they passed, with a vote of eighty-five to forty, a resolution to secede from the United States. This resolution had no legal effect, and Town Line's action was never recognized by either the Confederacy or the Union. Apparently, there are no actual records of this act, but author Wang believes the town fathers were motivated by their opposition to a potential military draft being considered by the Lincoln administration.

This is the setting, both physical and psychological, for Wang's novel. Pro-Union abolitionists Mary Willis and her father secretly take a run-away slave named Joe into their care, a fact that must be kept from their Copperhead neighbors, a strange group of mostly-German men who have seen an ad offering \$1,000 for the runaway. Hans, Karl, and Harry are also friends of Mary's older brother, Leander. Leander is not particularly motivated to do much in the way of running his father's successful sawmill. His father offers him the chance to go to New York and set up lumber deals for the mill instead, agreeing to share the profits with him. Needless to say, when Leander gets to New York City and meets a woman of less-than-sterling character everything goes to smash almost instantly. The results are murder, drug addiction, fear, infighting, and an illicit love affair.

The Hidden Light of Northern Fires is self-assured, intriguing, and sheds a light on a little-known part of the Civil War. The characters are fully developed, and this story of tragedy and family life is as much a mirror of today's social divide as it is a look at the effects of the Civil War in the north. The parallels are spot on.

Daren Wang is a good writer, and his book is firmly rooted in facts, but it is fiction, and I would urge readers not to ignore it because of its genre. It is about time the American Civil War began to be accepted as a proper subject for fiction. Historians look down their collective nose at anything without twenty-five pages of endnotes, but we should remember that *Gone with the Wind*, *Cold Mountain*, and *Killer Angels* have been stirring interest in this war since their publications. No one dismisses Robert Penn Warren for his use of the Civil War in so many of his works. It is just and right that the Civil War become a topic in fiction, just as it is in the movies. Perhaps this affects the impression many have of the war in some negative way, but there is enough information and opportunity out there to enlarge and correct factual errors. Many of you reading this short review initially became "civil warriors" because of an exciting movie or compelling book. Luckily, our favorite topic has the added enticement of the real war being just as interesting, if not more, so than the fictional one.

Wang gives us an excellent place to begin forming an idea about the northern home front. Take advantage of it, and work from there.

Meg Groeling received her Master's Degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Southern Illinois University Press has contracted for publication sometime within the next two years. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War.