

Not Even Past: The Stories We Keep Telling About the Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Sunshine, Daniel (2020) "Not Even Past: The Stories We Keep Telling About the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 22 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.22.2.08

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol22/iss2/8>

Review

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Spring 2020

Marrs, Cody. *Not Even Past: The Stories We Keep Telling About the Civil War.* Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$28 ISBN 9781421436654 pp. 185

Cody Marrs' newest book is a remarkably concise and modern introduction to Civil War memory. Although studies of memory inevitably overlap with historiography, you will find no dry discussions of the Dunning School or Eugene Genovese in *Not Even Past: The Stories We Keep Telling About the Civil War*. Instead, just four elegant chapters each tackle a major interpretation of the American Civil War. It is hard to imagine a better introduction to the topic for an undergraduate or an interested member of the public. Academic historians will learn nothing radically new in Marrs' book—but will nevertheless enjoy his readable prose, updated perspectives, and novel evidence. For example, it considers the modern white supremacist movement, its Lost Cause rhetoric, and Donald Trump's halfhearted condemnation of it. Still, the majority of the book is grounded in nineteenth-century sources and voices. Cody Marrs is a Professor of English at the University of Georgia, and he brings his unique skills to bear on a historical subject. For this reason too, academic historians will appreciate the book, loaded with more literary and cultural analysis than competing titles. Marrs is an expert in this sub-field, having already published *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War*, a thematic companion to *Not Even Past*.

There are a couple questions that animate this book: Why can't Americans get over the Civil War? Why are we constantly retelling the same few (and often contradictory) stories about the conflict? As Marrs notes wryly, there are 80,000 history books on the Civil War, in addition to innumerable other works of film, literature, and art. Even after all that mental effort expended, Americans are hardly any closer in arriving at a consensus understanding of the conflict's core issues. Marrs aims to analyze "several basic plots—primal stories that we tell each other again and again—[that] continually compete for cultural primacy." (7) He examines these stories through familiar giants of American literature like Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and Margaret Mitchell, but also through scores of lesser known authors and artists.

Chapter 1, “A Family Squabble,” considers the adage that the American Civil War was a conflict in which brother fought brother. Using the work of historians like Amy Taylor, Marris explains that such instances of loyalties dividing families were exceedingly rare. As now, families squabbled over politics, but nearly all families pledged loyalties to the same side during the Civil War. Marris posits that the brother vs. brother myth was primarily a Northern fiction that has since gained a more national (though not universal) acceptance in the twentieth century. This interpretation allows Americans to imagine the Civil War as a family disagreement, rather than two nation states trying bitterly to annihilate the other. The implication of this interpretation is that the two Americas were always destined for reconciliation. It suggests that Confederates were playing a preordained role in a divine plan necessary to propel the United States to world prominence. As Marris points out, this framing of the war is exclusively a white memory, as African Americans could not stomach painting Confederates as wayward brothers. The brother vs. brother myth also deifies Lincoln, who has undoubtedly earned his reputation as an outstanding leader but was nevertheless human and made mistakes. This interpretation casts Lincoln as a sorrowful father, almost removed from the conflict, waiting for his children to reconcile.

The second chapter analyzes military memory of the war, usually a cynical retelling of the conflict as a senseless, unnecessary struggle that shattered bodies, buildings, a nation, and even the very earth under which it was fought. This is Marris’ most provocative chapter, and his least convincing at its edges—though the core argument still holds up. There are also several different arguments in the chapter, some more convincing than others. The most persuasive argument is the tactical memory of the war, in which Americans primarily remember the conflict as a brilliant chess match between generals. This interpretation often pairs with the Lost Cause, as it makes no ideological claim itself. It dovetails with the Lost Cause emphasis on superior Southern generalship over incompetent but overpowering Yankee forces, thus redeploying the tactical memory for more sinister purposes.

The other military memory is that of a Vietnam War-like senseless bloodletting. Marris allows the excellence of Mark Twain to shine through here, before analyzing the deeper meanings, highlighting his own training as a literary historian. Like the tactical memory, the senseless struggle memory cedes ideological ground. The friction comes in comparison to the preceding and succeeding chapters, which each focus on a more deliberately constructed

memory of the war at the expense of the African American experience. While the ‘senseless struggle’ memory does unintentionally undercut the victory of emancipation, it nevertheless came from a genuine sense of mourning at mass death, on a scale never seen before or since in the United States. Marris knows this, for example, showing how Gardeners’ photographs of bloated American corpses shocked the nation. His subsequent comparisons to the War on Terror, and the American tradition of “exporting freedom” are worthwhile thought experiments. Individual readers may not find every one of these arguments entirely persuasive, but at the very least they will be thinking about the Civil War and its current relevance in new ways. History that does not challenge prior assumptions is often of little use.

The third and fourth chapters are less trailblazing than the first two, though they remain excellent introductions to the Lost Cause and Emancipation memory respectively. They are succinct, readable, and draw on sources old and new. Experienced historians will not find these sections quite as illuminating. For example, Frederick Douglass has been the subject of intense scholarship recently, and Marris cannot compete with Blight and others (nor is he trying to). Indeed, the book jacket boasts high praise from Blight himself. For professionals, the concise arguments and impressively clear prose save these chapters from being a chore, even when treading familiar ground like *Gone with the Wind*. Marris also considers new forms of evidence for old arguments that historians are likely less familiar with, such as Emancipation songs and sculptures. In the same vein, he uses the new evidence of the Neo-Nazi attack on Charlottesville in 2017 to show that the Lost Cause was not destroyed by the revisionist scholarship of the late twentieth century. It continues to find a sympathetic ear at the highest levels of government. One of the most original contributions in this section is his study of counterfactual Civil War novels, which he groups as largely a modern Lost Cause phenomena. Marris’ literary background is a strength here too. Most historians roll their eyes at the science fiction of Harry Turtledove and Newt Gingrich as unworthy of their attention. Marris instead asks why they remain popular, and how these counterfactual novels interpret the Civil War. He discovers that Confederacy almost always wins the war, and then carries out emancipation voluntarily, often in conflict with some emergent, even more racist threat. This pattern backs his assertion that these are modern Lost Cause works, painting slavery as incidental to Confederate war aims.

Marris’ book is a paragon of academic writing. When dealing with a topic as sprawling as the Civil War, historians often foreground their argument with a daisy chain of background

information. Marrs cuts to the heart of the matter with admirable clarity. He repurposes old arguments with fresh perspective and evidence both familiar and unknown. These new considerations, like comparisons to the War on Terror, may not convince every reader, but they are undeniably necessary to push the field forward. *Not Even Past* is an impressive feat that straddles the line between intense academic history and popular history. The world needs more such books.

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Potential Database Tags: American Civil War, Literary History, Race, Memory