

Conspiratorial Plot: Romance And Intrigue On Both Sides Of The Potomoc

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Recommended Citation

Fowler, Robert H. (2000) "Conspiratorial Plot: Romance And Intrigue On Both Sides Of The Potomoc," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol2/iss3/11>

Review

CONSPIRATORIAL PLOT

Romance and intrigue on both sides of the Potomoc

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Summer 2000

Jakes, John *On Secret Service*. Dutton Books, 2000-06-01. ISBN 052594544X

A work of fiction billed as an historical novel should be reviewed by three standards: what is its literary value? how historically accurate is it? how entertaining is it, or, put differently, is it a "good read"?

Only by the last-named standard can **On Secret Service** be given high marks. For a reader more interested in plot and action than in literary quality and historical accuracy, this spy story with gothic overtones should prove a satisfying read.

John Jakes really has done a skillful job of weaving his improbable plot into the larger story of the Civil War in the East. It is all there: rabid politics on both sides of the Potomac, the major battles, and the role of intelligence work in both North and South. He gets the big story right, while writing in a clear style, keeping the narrative moving briskly from cliff-hanger to cliff-hanger, serving up portions of steamy sex in between, and offering us plenty of heroes and heroines to admire and several villains it is fun to hate.

Inquiring minds want to know

Will the girl who dresses as a soldier to visit Union army camps be raped or will she be returned, her virginity intact, to her widowed father, a traitorous bureaucrat in Washington? Will her Southern-born girl friend leave her cold-blooded, war-profiteering husband for a Yankee undercover agent? Will she expose her psychotic older brother, a Confederate provocateur, in time to prevent the Draft Riots in New York City or the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865?

Then we come to the really big question. Was Lafayette C. Baker, the head of the Federal Secret Service, acting on behalf of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, actually behind the murder of Lincoln?

Although I hesitate to question the literary taste of John Jakes's many fans, I did find the interplay of the four main characters - two men and two women - rather forced. Naturally, two of the leading actors are of the Union persuasion and two of the Confederate. They fall in love with people on the wrong side of the War and get caught up in conspiratorial conflicts with members of their own families. Predictably, the action shifts back and forth, not always smoothly, between Washington and Richmond.

Habitual readers of romance novels might not find it off-putting for one character to "disclose" information about the course of the War to another who should have known it anyway. That is just Jakes's way of keeping the eavesdropping reader aware of what is happening in other quarters.

Romance novel readers also might have no problem with the way in which the characters in that Victorian Age so easily fall in love and into bed with each other.

And those with only a casual knowledge of the War might not be bothered by characters referring to Robert E. Lee familiarly as "Bob Lee" or to Stonewall Jackson as "Tom Jackson" or to John Wilkes Booth as "Johnny Booth." They might not raise their eyebrows at descriptions of "deep craters" being left by the shells of Confederate field artillery, ■ la the Western Front in World War I, or the presence of a fire burning in a railway carriage's stove on a day in May, or the implication that a large part of Mosby's Confederate partisans were Union Army deserters, or the false assertion that Lee's numbers in the Seven Days Battles were greatly inferior to those of McClellan, or the assumption that the Battle of Gettysburg lasted two days rather than three.

An earlier reviewer of his works called Jakes "the godfather of the historical novel." Some might think Kenneth Roberts or Hervey Allen more deserving of that title.

Enough of the quibbling. If even a deep-dyed Civil War buff can get past the early chapters of the book, and set aside his nitpicking knowledge of the War, he will find himself turning the pages to see what happens next.

Robert H. Fowler, the founder and former editor/publisher of Civil War Times Illustrated, is the author of several widely acclaimed historical novels.