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Review

SCARS OF WAR

'Unexpected turns and revelations' enliven this tale of Reconstruction

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Bahr, Howard *The Year of Jubilo: A Novel of the Civil War*. Henry Holt & Company, 2000-05-01. ISBN 805059725

Howard Bahr is already well-known to readers as the author of the acclaimed novel *The Black Flower*, a powerful and elegantly written book that captured the essential detail and wrenching violence of men in battle as have few other works of fiction about the Civil War or any other war. Now he has returned with another performance of equal skill and astonishing complexity.

Despite its subtitle, "A Novel of the Civil War," **The Year of Jubilo** is not so much about the conflict itself as the aftermath of the War, that period between surrender and the full onset of Reconstruction, when anger was still hot on both sides, as they sought to find a balance between the strong hold of the past and the uncertainties of the future. Confederate soldiers were returning home to find their homes destroyed or their families dispersed, Federal troops billeted to maintain civil order and peace, and occasional forays by remnants of local irregulars intent on fanning the flames of war again.

Set in the spring of 1865, **The Year of Jubilo** tells the story of Gawain Harper's return to Cumberland, Mississippi. He had enlisted in the Confederate army three years earlier because the father of his intended, Morgan Rhea, told Gawain that he could court her only if he did his manly duty by defending the sacred cause. A professor of English literature by trade and a freethinker by disposition, Gawain has little interest in politics or defending any cause beyond the traditional values of a civilized society.

Like his Arthurian namesake, however, Gawain accepts the challenge to win his lady love, but finds there are even more obstacles to overcome after the scaly dragon of war has been slain. Morgan's sister and her husband have been

murdered by a renegade leader of Southern irregulars, King Solomon Gault, who cares less about the principles of secession than about self-aggrandizement and establishing his own brand of brutal community justice after chasing out the Yankees. Morgan's father now requires that Gawain avenge their deaths by killing Gault.

Characters that irresistibly engage the reader

Such a bare-bones description hardly does justice to Bahr's narrative, which is complex, full of unexpected turns and revelations, and introduces a stage full of characters that wander in and out of the story in patterns governed both by Providence and circumstantial chance. Indeed, whenever Bahr's characters enter the narrative, they seem to arrive as fully embodied individuals rich in background experience and invested with a depth of personality that irresistibly engages the reader. They are people we would like to have known, and we regret when they leave the narrative to follow their own destinies in this world or beyond, even those killed in shameless acts of murder and perfidy.

The villain, Gault, for example, is someone the reader loves to hate. He is a thoughtful, introspective man who might have done considerable good for society were his thought processes not so hopelessly deranged. He hates slavery, not because of any sympathy for blacks, whom he considers to be brute beasts, but because he thinks it degrades the white slave owners. In fact, he had rid his own plantation of slaves and set up a primitive form of share cropping. Gault also has a sense of history and a literary turn of mind. He is writing his memoirs even as he enacts his evil deeds, often suiting the action to what will make good reading. In this instance, art shapes life in a direct way.

Wherever one looks, there is writing of extraordinary power and accomplishment. The prologue is a tour de force, relating the events of the murder and lynching of Morgan's sister and husband, but told from the point of view of their young son, who is blind. The text is rich in the sensory detail of touch and sound as it would be expressed by a boy without sight. Not once does Bahr slip and allow his omniscience to move beyond what the character can know and feel as we experience the inner life and imagination of the boy.

This is not the only passage that is fully saturated with intimate details of sound, light, color, smells, flora, and fauna which go to make up nature. Fresh air, foul odors, and the sweat of human pain play on our senses. Bahr has as keen

an eye and ear for man in his social and environmental state as any living writer and better than most long since dead.

"Freedom" is the key thematic word in the novel, repeated from time to time by one character or another, each with a different expectation or meaning. In general, it means the escape from the strictures of society and politics, the ability to come and go as one wishes, and the liberty to be someone important or of no consequence in accord with the dictates of one's heart. It is the freedom to belong to one's self and to escape the inevitable rush of history and circumstance. As one character puts it, reflecting on the times before the settlement of the wilderness, "It was fun then and the closest I ever came to freedom. We made up the rules as we went along, and everybody thrived on possibility - what we could make of this place, what it might become - and God's will seemed to match our own so perfectly that we applauded Him for His good judgment." Most of the principled characters seem to find their freedom in one way or another.

A native of Meridian, Mississippi, Howard Bahr knows his South and the facts of the Civil War as well as most scholars who spend a lifetime in research. As a young man, he worked on the Illinois Central Railroad in Gulfport, Mississippi, during which time he began to read William Faulkner and Southern literature. From 1982 to 1993 he communed with the spirit of the master as curator of Faulkner's home and museum in Oxford, Mississippi, and since 1993 he has been a professor of English at Motlow State Community College in Tullahoma, Tennessee. His work-in-progress deals with Southern life in the 1930s for a brakeman on the Southern Railway between New Orleans and Meridian. Wherever he sets his future fiction, it seems likely that Howard Bahr will prove to be a major presence in American literature.

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