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Leah Wood Jewett

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Interview

MARLY YOUMANS DISCUSSES HER NOVEL, 'THE WOLF PIT'

Jewett, Leah Wood

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Double helix of black and white

*Marly Youmans' novel, **The Wolf Pit**, is the winner of the 2001 Michael Shaara Award for Civil War Fiction sponsored by Jeff Shaara and the U.S. Civil War Center. Other works include: Little Jordan (David R. Godine, Publisher, 1995); Catherwood (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996); The Curse of the Raven Mocker, a fantasy novel set in the Carolina and Tennessee mountains (Farrar, Straus & Giroux Books for Young Readers, Fall 2003); and Claire, a collection of poems (Louisiana State University Press, Fall 2003). Recently Youmans completed another novel, A Death at the White Camellia Orphanage.*

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): *What inspired you to write a novel about the Civil War?*

Marly Youmans (MY): Well, if drops fall on stone for long enough, a bowl is formed which can hold water: for a year or so my eldest child pelted me with facts and stories about the Civil War, until at last one day I caught myself dreaming up soldiers and slaves. Our family made pilgrimages to battlefields at New Market and Gettysburg and elsewhere, heard a rabid secessionist rant in a field of wildflowers near Pendleton, South Carolina, attended reenactments, visited museums, and read. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* weighed down my son's bedside table. Fragments of shell, minie balls, Confederate bills, and daguerreotypes became favorite gifts. My son felt the jab of a two-pronged dilemma: Confederate soldiers in his mother's family tree; a stark black-and-white morality that told him that his ancestors were on the wrong side.

CWBR: *The Wolf Pit follows the stories of two very different characters experiencing war in their own ways. What led you to Agate, a young enslaved woman, and Robin, a Confederate soldier? Why do you believe their stories are*

best told through different points of view?

MY: A writer who rejects outlines and lists and orderliness and likes surprise and instinct, I admit that I also don't pillage characters from life. I prefer the pleasures of make-believe figures who emerge from my head like an Athena, mysterious, complete, newborn.

After months of occasionally daydreaming about people in *The Wolf Pit*, I woke one morning having dreamed the opening chapters of the book. In pursuing dual narratives, I obeyed the dream. But in the past I have been attracted to writers who braid several voices together, particularly Faulkner and Wilkie Collins (*The Moonstone*) and (*The Woman in White*.) From the very beginning I pictured the shape of the book as a helix, two stories twisted together but independent.

Since I don't want to be regarded as a chaotic primitive, I'll point out that I am orderly in my own way—the way of a plant leafing out, I hope and that I am hard-nosed and ruthless in revision.

CWBR: *Is it essential for us to know them in order to understand the war?*

MY: No. I don't believe that's the purpose of art, to elucidate a problem or an enigma. What I try to do is to pursue the ever-new conflicts of heart and mind, to make a thing of truth, beauty, and vigor, to wrestle with the angel of art until he gives me a blessing.

Fiction rescues the anonymous and unseen soul out of the maw of history, and in that sense we feel and know in the realm of the past--if the book keeps its promises to the reader. I dislike tales that outfit contemporary woes in the fancy dress of earlier centuries.

CWBR: *Many novelists would have followed the clichéd path to an amorous relationship between these two characters. Did you consciously avoid that direction? How is the story more effective with Agate and Robin never meeting?*

MY: I knew from the beginning that they could never meet. And in retrospect I see that the helix of structure works as an emblem of the way black and white were twisted close together in the South but in some important ways

never touched. The two stories hold up a mirror to the house divided against itself that cannot stand--like the cracked mansion reflected in bloody pools. Yet on the level of the spirit and sensibility, Agate and Robin bear certain similarities and are kindred, and Milia is a kind of mother to Agate as well as to her own children. So there's a strong tension to the helix, created by likenesses and by the chasm between one race's situation and the other's. The reader's natural impulse to foretell an encounter or match is opposed by the cruel facts of life.

I may have some tendency to subvert expectation: in a novel I began last fall, the beginning appears rather like the start of a murder mystery. Instead of a narrowing to a discovered victim, the story widens and embraces all as guilty--at least, that is what the protagonist concludes.

CWBR: What does a female author bring to Civil War fiction that perhaps a male author does not?

MY: As mother of a daughter and sons, I know that all I was told about gender as a young woman was mistaken: girls and boys are astonishingly different. Yet when I write, I write out of a part of me that is not allied to female or male. However, I have thought about being a woman in connection with this book—I've wondered how I could have deprived myself so long of the great swoop and verve of men in action. With *Catherwoodd* I discovered that I liked to describe dynamic, powerful motion. To write about something like the eruption that formed the Petersburg Crater is sheer terrible delight.

Being a woman and a writer affects me in more practical ways; as my youngest child was not yet in school, I drafted this book after my children's bedtime, finishing up each night sometime between one and four in the morning and stumbling out of bed--hair standing on end and shooting sparks--at seven to get the older two ready for school.

CWBR: The image of the pit recurs throughout the novel as a metaphor for war. Why this symbol? What about it resonates more than other representations?

MY: The pit where slaves pray and where Young Master dies, the paddled holes where slaves sing, the scooped-out hollow for Sallie's pregnant belly, the wolf pits in the Old and New Worlds, the Crater, the trenches in which soldiers are thrown, the grave: all these and other such thresholds of death and birth and

rebirth have their being because a novel is a living thing that creates resemblances. In groping toward the light, it tends toward images most kin to its deepest sources, just as flower, fruit, and leaf are kin to the taproot in the ground. And what all those images mean and how they relate to one another is not for me to tell, because the fullness of meaning and knowledge lies in their mystery.

CWBR: *You mentioned that your novel was first published in 2001, and was released just after September 11. Had you started writing *The Wolf Pit* afterwards instead, do you think that the tragedies of that day and world events over the last few months would have let you to write a different novel?*

MY: The story was altered by events for at least a few readers; for them, the birth of the Petersburg Crater was a kind of faraway echo to the destruction of the towers. And the novel I drafted in the fall was influenced by September 11 in certain curious specifics and, at times, in mood. Yes, I imagine it would have seeped in and added its own somber dye.