

Chickahominy Fever

Diana E. Barrett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Barrett, Diana E. (2003) "Chickahominy Fever," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 .
Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol5/iss3/8>

Review

Barrett, Diana E.

Summer 2003

McMillan, Ann *Chickahominy Fever*. Viking Press, \$22.95 ISBN 670031070

Seven days in Richmond

History meets mystery

It isn't my job to give the details of the battles . . . What I write is more Odyssey than Iliad . . . more ordinary folk, not so much gods and generals, Brit Wallace, a London newspaperman, responds when an officious Confederate officer suspects him of spying. It also suggests Ann McMillan's approach to her Civil War history-mystery series set in Richmond, Virginia. The fourth and latest book, **Chickahominy Fever**, takes place during the week of June 22, 1862 as Richmond faces the Seven Days Battle led by the relatively yet unknown Robert E. Lee.

Chickahominy Fever opens in President Jefferson Davis's study as Brigadier General Henry Wise presents him with a sealed letter detailing the dangers facing the Confederacy and describing the reinforcements he needs. Knowing the futility of the request Davis consigns it to the fire unopened after the general leaves. Susy Reynolds, a free black woman placed in the Davis household as a spy by Unionist Louisa Ferncliff, secretly retrieves the letter before it is destroyed. If the information reaches Union commanders it will be devastating for the Confederates. Soon after, both Susy and the letter disappear.

Other seemingly unrelated strands of the mystery eventually intertwine including morphine stolen from the hospital, a death certificate for a soldier where there is no corpse, a black baby wrapped in a filthy scrap of quilt discovered abandoned in the church cemetery, and a black man found shot and buried in a shallow grave in the same cemetery. McMillan skillfully pulls these and other threads together as she keeps us intrigued with the threat of the approaching battle.

A wealth of homely details of life, the times and the war are woven into the story. They never become the appliqué sometimes found in historical fiction. For example, President Davis requests cold tea to serve General Wise. Since any ice that had survived the weeks of hot weather had been sent to the hospitals, Suzy Reynolds fetches a pitcher of brewed tea from the cellar where at least it was kept cool enough to provide relief. An illiterate mother searches for her son by comparing the letters of his name and regiment printed for her on a scrap of paper with those on the roster of the dead. Narcissa nursing a soldier suffering from tetanus dribbles thin broth through his locked jaws using a tube she has carefully carved from the quill of a feather.

Each chapter opens in the morning and closes at the end of a single day, and during each day the characters interweave the warp and weft of the plot with the fears and confines of war. We meet again from the earlier books, the young white widow, Narcissa Powers, who nurses the sick and wounded in the hastily constructed Chimborazo Hospital, the free black doctress Judah Daniel, and the British journalist mentioned above, Brit Wallace. Others making repeat appearances are Narcissa's sister-in-law, Mirrie Powers, a strong abolitionist, Dr. Cameron Archer and others from the medical and the free black communities. Instead of a single sleuth who investigates the mystery, McMillan has structured a narrative in which each character adds pieces to the puzzle. Narcissa has social and hospital connections. Judah Daniel can become the invisible black man learning things through gossip with household slaves. Brit Wallace listens to war talk among soldiers in the bars and tags along to the battlefield. Mirrie's abolitionist sympathies gain confidences in the Ferncliff household.

Louisa Ferncliff and Susy Reynolds are fictional versions of Elizabeth Van Lew, the Richmond Unionist, and Mary Elizabeth Bower, her free black servant, supposedly placed by Elizabeth in the household of Jefferson Davis. History-mystery well done sparks further interest in the time, place and people written about. McMillan includes reading suggestions, both fiction and non-fiction, about Elizabeth Van Lew in an afterward that also suggests other sources relevant to the novel.

Contrasting characters and situations create texture. Besides the class system of the Tidewater gentry there's the snobbery of the slaves who puffed themselves out like toads because their masters held positions in the Confederate government, and the free blacks who need to remain submissive and careful that they don't aggravate those whites who need to feel powerful. Mirrie the staunch

abolitionist is juxtaposed against Narcissa who would tell Lincoln to, Leave us to solve our own problems. Judah Daniel plies her African and Native American herbalist knowledge to care for the black community both free and slave while Narcissa cares for soldiers struggling with Chickahominy fever (malaria), tetanus, infection, gangrene and amputations.

The series presents a sympathetic view of the South but excludes a simplistic South vs. North position. After all, war is hell for both sides. Civil War buffs that have concentrated on battles and battlefields will find much here to fill out the impact of the war. Widows, orphans, loss, sickness, deprivation, dislocation, fear and greed are also part of that tragedy.

McMillan has been a writer and editor for the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond and that background brings authority to her writing. Each book in the series introduces a fascinating medical situation relevant to the time and ties it to an unpredictable mystery. This technique combined with her well-researched history makes this series well worth reading. Each book can stand alone, and it is not necessary to read them in order. However, they do follow the war chronologically. Her third book, *Civil Blood*, set just a few weeks earlier during the Battle of Fair Oaks (Seven Pines), follows the same format as **Chickahominy Fever** and the two read well together. McMillan writes Civil War history and mystery from a unique perspective. Let's hope she finds ways to keep her characters involved in the war so there will be future books to enjoy.

A historical researcher, Diana E. Barrett (dbarrett@triton.net) is co-editor (with Jo Ellyn Clarey) of a work-in-progress about history-mystery novels by women writers.