

Only Call Us Faithful: A Novel of the Union Underground

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Review

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Jakober, Marie *Only Call Us Faithful: A Novel of the Union Underground*. Forge, \$25.95 ISBN 765303167

Spectre of a spy

A ghostly retelling of the life of Liza Van Lew

Marie Jakober has written a Civil war novel that is both intriguing and refreshing. It is a distant, wispy yet compelling story that draws the reader in like fog rising from the James River might draw a boat toward disaster. Elizabeth Liza Van Lew, the main character, was the spinster daughter of a wealthy Richmond, Virginia family. In her era, unmarried women were objects of pity and scorn. Liza was educated in the North, and while there she adopted opinions that made her decidedly unpopular in the capitol city of the Confederacy. She was a woman of conscience, a quiet feminist, who wanted to end slavery and preserve the Union. The Van Lew family once moved in the highest social circles of Richmond, but Liza's strange ideas and behavior caused the family to be dropped from the rounds of parties and balls. She was an abolitionist who freed her family's slaves after the death of her father. She turned down several suitable offers of marriage because she had no love for the prospective bridegrooms. As she moved toward middle age, she became more and more peculiar. She wore old, fussy clothing better suited to a young girl, and she was seen walking Richmond's streets in all kinds of weather, talking to herself. Soon she was known to one and all as Crazy Bet.

Elizabeth Van Lew was a Union sympathizer. She and her family were shunned by Richmond's social elite, who were ardent Confederate supporters. But Liza herself, seen as harmless and strange, won permission to send food, blankets and books to the Union officers held captive at Libby prison. She acquired military information from her contact with these Yankee officers. She used her well-known oddities of behavior and habits to cover her meetings with other information gatherers. Little did the Confederate authorities suspect that

the odd, half-crazy spinster was the leader of a ring of Union spies.

Only Call Us Faithful is an unusual and imaginative novel about a real Union sympathizer and spy who used a network of operatives to smuggle valuable information about troop movements and the plans of top Confederate commanders through army lines to the Union generals. The story is not bound to a simple time frame, as most Civil war stories are usually told. Liza and her compatriots are portrayed as their contemporaneous selves, but they are also portrayed as unquiet ghosts revisiting the scenes they once lived. Jakober uses a constantly shifting time frame to show events from all sides û as they occurred, after the events played out, and from a far-away vista. There is an overlying tale about Civil War spies, their machinations, and the events they influenced. There is a subtle underlying theme about how history is changed and rewritten to suit the historian. The approach is extraordinary enough to spark the reader's interest in this story, to compel her to read it, and then to send her to the reference shelf for more information about the real people that the novel is based upon.

Using Elizabeth Van Lew as her spokesperson, Jakober tells us that the elite class caused the sectional conflict out of economic and social self-interest and shaped the history of the South and of the Southern Confederacy. After the Civil War, this defeated class of former slaveholders became the preservers of memory for the South. They fashioned history to suit themselves, to gloss over the suffering and wrongs of slavery and to produce a myth about a lost society of wealth, ease, and charm. Liza Van Lew is a tool employed by Jakober to retell history in her own way. The novel, however, never becomes preachy or self-important. It simply presents a story from history in a new way that inspires the reader to reexamine her set of opinions and her storehouse of facts.

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