

### In Time of War

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## Review

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**Appel, Allen** *In Time of War*. Carroll & Graf, \$25.00 ISBN 786711620

Turning Back the Clock

Modern characters struggle to navigate the past

**In Time of War**, by Allen Appel, starts with a bang—literally. Time-traveler, Alex Balfour, arrives on a steep hillside in the Shenandoah Valley between the forces of Custer and Sheridan just moments before the battle of Cedar Creek commences in October of 1864. After taking a bullet in the leg, he drags himself into a nearby wood to hide while the battle rages around him. He fears he'll be identified as a rebel, or worse, a spy, because of his 20th century casual clothes, and if he doesn't staunch the flow of blood from his leg he'll die. After listening to the cries of the wounded and dying during a terrifying night without food or water, he's grateful for daylight. Two injured soldiers nearby, one no more than a boy, share their small supply of filthy water with him.

During the second night as he lies in the cold and rain, feverish and semi-delirious, the boy covers him with a dead soldier's Union coat, and drives off the hogs that come in the dark to feed on the bodies. The next morning a preacher strides into the woods, stops in front of the soldier and boy, shoots the man and drags off the boy. Alex vows not only to find the boy whom he had promised to repay for saving his life, but to uncover this cold-blooded murderer.

Fortunately, because battlefield doctors expect Alex to die, they don't waste their time amputating his leg. Assuming he's a Union soldier because of his coat, they send him by train to the hospital in Washington D.C. figuring the trip will kill him, or if not, the doctors in Washington will be responsible. As he recovers in the new Patent Office Building, converted to a hospital, he becomes acquainted with his neighbor on the next cot, author Ambrose Bierce.

Appel draws on some of Bierce's Civil War stories for added color. What I Saw of Shiloh reflects Bierce's actual experience at the Battle of Shiloh Church in 1862. However, he treats The Affair at Coulter's Notch as a factual event when, in reality, it is a fictional story with fictional characters. The time-lapse theme of another fiction, An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, works well contextually.

In addition to hunting for the soldier's murderer, Balfour attempts to change history on two levels: he desperately wants to prevent the murder of his modern girlfriend, journalist Molly Glenn, that has already happened in Japan; and he believes he can thwart the assassination of President Lincoln, thus changing the course of history. He eventually exposes his time-travel circumstances and describes the plan of John Wilkes Booth to Bierce who, as expected, reacts with disbelief and suspicions about Alex himself. He's incredulous that a famous, well-respected actor could be involved in such a plot, but ultimately convinced, he agrees to help foil the assassination of Lincoln. Because Alex knows about the intended murder of the president, Chief of Detectives for the War Department and head of the Secret Service, Colonel Lafayette Baker, believes he's a Confederate spy involved in the plot so he secretly incarcerates him in Maryland's Point Lookout Prison on the Chesapeake Bay.

When Molly Glenn, Balfour's pregnant girlfriend, arrives--from a future where she's not yet dead--she connects with Bierce. They team up to deter Booth since Balfour cannot be found. Molly and Alex spend a good part of the book searching for each other, but after he endures a harrowing escape from prison they're reunited at Ford Theater, she has the baby, and Alex's father, also a time-traveler (it's in the genes), complicates their return to modern life. The identity of the boy and the battlefield murderer remain to be discovered by library research when Alex returns to the present.

Appel uses the life and career of Ambrose Bierce to create an interesting character and counterpart to Alex. However, Lafayette Baker, essentially the father of the modern Secret Service, is a one-dimensional villain--an opportunity lost to flesh-out a complex man with a complicated career. Molly appears to be written by a man who thinks he knows how intelligent, independent women act, but the author falls short. Molly is determined to be a contemporary woman while coping with 19th century traditions. Walt Whitman, Matthew Brady, physician Mary Edwards Walker, Charles Dana, Julia Ward Howe, and Sidney Lanier among others seem pasted onto the plot and serve little purpose except

name dropping.

A vigorous debate often occurs when historical fiction writers discuss how strictly one should follow history. The more conservative viewpoint strongly advocates sticking to the facts while writers with a more liberal perspective feel justified in changing actual events and people if it facilitates the plot. For example, historically, Ambrose Bierce spent time in the hospital for a head wound he suffered at the battle of Kennesaw Mountain, but in *Chattanooga*, not Washington D.C.. At the time of Lincoln's assassination he was a treasury agent being attacked by bandits in Selma, Alabama. The author takes greater liberties with Lafayette Baker; a fictional daughter placed at Cedar Creek when the murder occurs, and Baker made responsible for the murder. Unrealistically, Molly Glenn trots about Washington D.C. unmarried and noticeably pregnant, lives in a brothel, works as a journalist, and finally, arrives in the balcony of Ford Theater where her water breaks--and no one notices.

If your reading tastes are broad and include time-travel, you may want to try **In Time of War** to see how Appel plays with the conventions of that genre. His other Alex Balfour novels are, **Time after Time**, **Twice upon a Time**, and **Till the End of Time**. If you are a serious Civil War reader and like your historical fiction straight, you may want to give this one a pass.

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