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A Distant Flame:A Novel of the Civil War

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Review

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Williams, Philip Lee *A Distant Flame:A Novel of the Civil War*. Thomas Dunne Books, \$24.95 ISBN 312332521

A sharpshooter's memory

Surviving the Atlanta Campaign

There has been much historical writing in recent years on why humans go to war and why they stay to fight--including books ranging from John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* to more recent work regarding Civil War soldiers, such as McPherson's *For Cause and Comrades*. We value highly the memoirs, letters, and journals that have come to print in the last two decades, especially. But I would suggest that the historian's work can take us only so far. In Philip Lee Williams' **A Distant Flame**, we have Charlie Merrill, a sensitive and prescient boy whose reasons for going to war are perhaps too complex to express in a letter or journal. He is scarcely aware of them himself, and may not even feel that he has ever been able to identify them--and so he is one of a species of troubled and conflicted warriors whose minds are continually exploring the question of *Why?* as he fights. He does not fight for the typical reasons, or for any reasons we--or he--can recognize or articulate. He is introspective and contemplative enough to fully confront and interpret the horrors of the events around him, but too honest to dispose of them by cant or philosophical stoicism.

In form, the novel is a frame tale: a tale of war by way of mature hindsight and recollection. Chronologically, the story takes place in a single day: July 22, 1914. This focusing of time and events is reminiscent of Joyce's *Ulysses* or Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*--the sort of novel where the essence of a character's life is distilled into a single day of culmination and epiphany. Perhaps a closer correspondence can be found in Lockridge's *Raintree County*, which also offers a Civil War veteran on a day of commemoration, exploring the meanings of his past and his life.

68-year-old Charlie Merrill has been asked by his hometown of Branton, Georgia (based closely on Williams's own hometown of Madison, Georgia) to give the keynote speech at the memorial park on the 50th anniversary celebration of the Battle of Atlanta. In the course of the day, flashbacks and memories of the past fill in between the world of his teen years during the war and the current day--a day that looms in his consciousness as one of culmination. His family and neighbors visit, and all ask if he has written his speech yet. He reassures them, but does not know what he will say. He is renowned in Branton as the newspaper editor, a published author, the region's literary light. Yet he is perplexed as to how to express his war experience. Dilemma: he cannot give a flags-and-glory speech, because of his integrity--nor can he express to the crowd (if indeed this were possible) the ungodly, bloody horror of battle and what it does to the human heart.

The flashbacks focus on the war years, alternating between the battlefield and the more idyllic days before he went into the army. Charlie Merrill is nearly fourteen when the war begins, and is frail and sickly. He and his best friend Jack Dockery, who is crippled, are bookish boys in love with words and learning, whose witty banter is a hobby for them. In spite of his sickliness, Charlie has one skill that is not intellectual: he is a crack shot with a rifle and is widely known for it. He dreams of military service. His Baptist minister father, Charles Merrill, Sr., deeply moral and sensitive, is troubled about the war. Indeed, many in Branton are conflicted. Williams points out that, in his research, he was surprised to find out how many people in his town of Madison were opposed to the War and the Southern cause at the time.

Charlie's older brother Tom runs away to join the army, against his father's wishes. The War itself, the meaninglessness and horror of a fratricidal war, weighs down their father, and in his mourning, Charles, Sr. takes his own life with a gun. The bereaved family--now just Charlie, his mother, and his beloved sister Martha--are forced to move from the parsonage to a small log home and poverty. Some time later, they receive news that Tom is dead.

From the beginning of the war, Charlie befriends Sarah Pierce, a Yankee girl whose broken family has thrown her on an uncle's care. Awkward and friendless in the Georgia town, she is also a reader and thinker, and soon she and Charlie find in each other kindred spirits. When Charlie becomes gravely ill, Sarah spends every day at his side until he recovers. They share a love for wit, for Shakespeare's poems, for almost everything--and finally for each other. It is a

rather more mature and sober love than we expect from teens--but they have both been harrowed by grief unknown to most their age, and they make love, driven together by the grief and uncertainty of their world.

Soon after, his friend Jack Dockery dies from his handicap. Grief-stricken, Charlie goes to Sarah's house for comfort, and finds that her father has sent her against her will to London. In his rage, he takes his rifle and takes a train north, joining up with Bragg's army south of Chattanooga. He never officially enlists, but simply hooks up with an Arkansas regiment in Gen. Cleburne's brigade. He goes through the Chickamauga and Chattanooga campaigns, but most of the novel's action is in the Atlanta campaign, from Dalton to Resaca on down to the fall of the city after Hood's furious counterattacks. Sarah has left him a letter which becomes a talisman of hope for him, the text of which resurfaces often in the novel as a haunting refrain. It is his tie to hope. Charlie is befriended by Duncan McGregor, a cracker-barrel philosopher and wit, who watches out for him. When Charlie is recruited for Cleburne's crack sharpshooter company, Duncan goes with him, looking after Charlie's safety but even more for his soul and mental health, as Charlie's spirit begins to deteriorate and wither from the obscenities he witnesses every day. The misery gets worse with the senseless bloodbath of Kennesaw Mountain, the ghastly heat of that summer of 1864, and the depleting of the Army of Tennessee by flood, disease, and battles of attrition as Sherman circles his prey. Atlanta falls, and there is nothing to stop the Union forces now.

As Charlie endures the soul-numbing fatigue and despair of the Confederate Army in the last stages of losing Atlanta, he finally loses all his rage and motivation for battle. Like many a literary predecessor, such as Hemingway's Frederic Henry or Inman from Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, he leaves the Army and heads home. Sick and wounded, he is cared for by the Bondurants, an older couple who lost all of their sons in the war, but find a measure of peace in divorcing their hearts from the Southern cause and from God, and anything else except the necessity for human love and compassion. This is the core value in the novel, and we are meant to admire most those who live by bonds of family, friendship, love, and the milk of human kindness. Changed forever and partly healed by the Bondurants's love, Charlie returns home to a hero's welcome.

Williams' use of a sharpshooter as a main character--and perhaps this is why others, such as David Madden in *Sharpshooter*, have used it--enables his protagonist to see a much broader picture of war than would a regular

infantryman in the ranks. Charlie becomes a free-lance observer as well as a free-lance killer. We, the readers, see much more through his eyes. Unfortunately, this also enables him to witness what most soldiers never witness--he can see the men he kills with his scoped Whitworth rifle, and knows just when they die and how well the shots went home. He is very good at it, but due to his essential humanity, he sickens into despair and ennui. Here we have a character forced to confront, in a personal and emphatic way, the killing he has to do as a soldier.

The implicit criticism for the terrible waste and wrongness of the Southern cause is indirect, yet strong in the core values of the novel's world. In one discussion on page 55, Duncan acknowledges that when he dies, it shall be for a rich man and not for my country. Charlie responds, confessing that he believes the entire war to be a tragic mistake, and that the South's cause is not just. This is one more phase in Charlie's struggle to find out what he is fighting for.

The novel is an intricate exploration of the theodicy of the war, and of causes, and the great *Why?* raised so often in the discussion of this war. It is easy to dwell on despair and ennui in a war novel, but Williams makes his characters' questions about the meaning of life and the war in the eyes of God ring true. Duncan McGregor is a fatalist, swept up in the forces of history, with no free will of his own. General Cleburne, a sensitive soul appalled by the slaughter, is so fully imbued with gratitude to his adopted home and patriotism for the Southern Cause that he is torn by these two opposing forces. In their unlikely friendship, Cleburne and Charlie part ways over it as Charlie finally decides that it is not his cause, and that he must kill no more, or perish. We get this message: humankind is indeed vicious, bloody, and unimproved since his evolution--but he is worth redemption and is capable of much good.

These are the memories that Charlie confronts on this commemorative day in 1914 as he contemplates so many things he wants to forget--and contemplates what he will tell his town and friends in his speech. To some degree, to express the meaning of the war is an impossible task, since it would be making tangible something that is meaningful only to the individual. In our cultural myth (at least the Northern version), we have usually said that the War was awful but worth it, even divinely ordained, and that it brought a new birth of freedom and sense of nationhood. But many writers have raised the hard question: what if the war was really a bloody and ghastly mistake, and that the things we gained were not worth the 620,000 lives lost? We have a deep-seated need to say that a war is

worth the cost, partly because we cannot bear to face the possibility that the young soldiers died in vain. This is also a crucial question for Charlie as he mulls over these memories, searching for something to express at his speech--something that will express the truth without harrowing up the souls of his neighbors and friends and demeaning their loss. Did any good accrue from this sacrifice? Charlie is sure, at least, that he is not prepared to accept the perfect nihilism of Mr. Bondurant, who says that there is no meaning in anything: Meanings ain't in things. . . . They just is.

During the day, he dreams of Sarah Pierce and fantasizes that she might show up for the speech, bringing redemption and closure to his life. In between memories (and sometimes triggering them), he receives visits from his neighbors, his daughter, sister, and many others. A significant visit is from Jim, the 16-year-old grandson of Charlie's black mammy--a family friend. They end up on the balcony, talking, when Jim provides Charlie a redemption of sorts: some kind of meaning to life and so to the war that he can use, telling him that he was the greatest man ever to live in Branton, and had the respect of both black and white: Didn't you know that, Mr. Charlie? That people say you the greatest man in the history of this town? They say you give more, done more, seen more than any man. That you axed little in return, that you are a good and famous man. My mama says you was born with a good heart, and that there ain't a colored person in this county don't know it. That you was borned with suffering and that you have bore it up for us on the wings of a dove (273-74). Charlie is surprised to hear this. He reflects on all of the newspaper columns he wrote, how he had spoken of sacrifice and truth and honor and love. He had told stories of the common man and woman, small tales of lives well lived (274). His redemption is in the legacy of his writing and his life.

In the final moments before his speech at the park, he wistfully looks for Sarah in the crowd. He ponders the central question of the novel: Why had he lived through that war? Was it by design or accident? He wanted to see a shape to time, for it to have a plot, a central meaning, but there were only episodes, spilled words, loves and losses (278). He knows what the crowd wants: mythology and happy plantations with happy slaves and cavaliers. His sister Martha warns him to say that the fallen men died for a good cause. But Charlie responds on page 281, They didn't die for nothing. . . . They died to keep the country together and rid it of slavery. . . . The South was wrong and has paid for it bitterly. But he cannot tell them that, either.

The speech is a decisive moment in the novel. As he speaks, he begins with a panorama of memories--of the soldiers in camp and on the battlefield, of the happy town before the war, and a host of nostalgic and graphic images of Chickamauga and other fights. The simple elegance of the speech moves the audience deeply, even as he includes the pain and stench of battle and dying men. As he warms to his subject, improvising as he goes, with eloquence and vividness he defines one of the great themes of this novel, and perhaps of all historical novels and their uses: I cannot, then, touch that past. I cannot bring you a victory that it was ordained we should never have in the Battle of Atlanta. I cannot touch mythologies that we construct to explain such loss, and I dare not. We invent the past to suit our present, but there is no truth in the present, for with each breath it is drawn backward into history. It is not the present in which we act, but the past that we attempt to rearrange. All our loves, our losses, the men and women who walked with us, the children lost, the sorrows born in the night--these we reshape until they become stories that make sense and hold us by our childlike hands. . . . We celebrate the shape of loss and the turning of our faces from unity to tragedy and back to harmony once again. We must understand our own wounds and find some way to forgive those who wounded us. We must on this day celebrate not a way of life lost. . . . but great love, sustained and sacrificed (295). This not only brings closure to Charlie, and to his neighbors, but powerfully engages the great questions of the war for us as well. Later that night, he dreams that Sarah comes to him. And he dies quietly.

Besides the healing power of these words, they also demonstrate (on the part of Williams) a savvy of the power of language to shape and reify our experience. Earlier in the day, Charlie muses on page 22: History, he thought, was who had the loudest and most persistent voice. . . . History was a collective imagination, not the truth. It was the story of our stories, solidified into stone.

Williams has impressive skill with language: the poetic care with words that distinguishes *Cold Mountain*, the finely drawn characters that distinguish *Jacob's Ladder*, and the seamless weaving in of the War's issues that distinguish *The Killer Angels*, are all here. His research is conscientious. His vivid imagery punches hard. The battle scenes are exquisitely ghastly. There is no flinching--mostly because we see the battle through Charlie's eyes and he cannot deny the report of his senses.

Since the ancients, on up through Sir Philip Sidney and John Dryden, literary scholars have argued that literature can tell the Truth about the past that

histories cannot reveal. I would claim for Philip Lee Williams' *A Distant Flame* a prominent place among the novels which are most meaningful in our quest to understand this vast and elusive question of our collective past. It is a must-read. Neither an apology for any cause nor an angst-riddled nihilistic tract for the fashionably disillusioned, *A Distant Flame* is a moving and beautifully-crafted story that leaves one with hope for humankind's redemption.

Randal Allred is associate professor of English and teaches writing and American literature at Brigham Young University-Hawaii, where he also directs the Honors Program. He has recently published articles on battle reenacting as well as Stephen Crane. He is writing a book on battle reenacting that is due out in 2006, and is working on a book on writing the Civil War in American fiction.