

### How I Found the Strong:A Novel of the Civil War

Larry Olpin

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## Review

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**McMullan, Margaret** *How I Found the Strong: A Novel of the Civil War*.  
Houghton Mifflin, \$15.00 hardcover ISBN 061835008X

Traditional tale for young readers

Moral Mississippi boy sets his slave free

Told from the traditional point of view of the young boy not old enough to go to war but old enough to long for the adventure, this fast moving first novel touches about every facet of the usual Civil War story. The setting is rural Mississippi during the years 1861-1863. Events range from the horrors of war found in the returning wounded, given due emphasis in the father who returns with one arm, to the devastation of the land that leads a proud family to beg and to contemplate violence against a kindly pastor who has a little food. On the less grim side, the boy sparks a golden haired girl with success despite a pair of homemade shoes that are comically oversized. Two memorable characters in the novel are a blind grandmother who combines a strongly religious temperament with an equally strong bitterness and a more genial grandfather who sees fit to simply leave it all, the grandmother and the war, and head for Texas.

The domestic scene is the backdrop to the novel's main concerns: slavery and race relations. In this regard the novel's attitudes reflect modern times rather than those of mid-19th century Mississippi. The narrator of the novel, who is the designated scholar of the family, has a slave companion named Buck who serves as the center of his race consciousness. Very early he finds himself uncomfortable about the use of the word darky. He is properly horrified by the hanging of a young Negro, and at the bequest of his mother sets out to teach Buck to read. The boy's maturity and his heroism are marked in his freeing of Buck on the banks of the Strong River, an apt symbol of his growing moral state. The novel is remindful of Huck Finn's story without the irony of Huck's tormented conscience. Reconstruction is foreshadowed in the person of a Confederate soldier who threatens Buck and will be a part of the Ku Klux Klan.

In an author's note at the end, McMullan, an English Professor at the University of Evansville, tells of her roots in Mississippi and that the novel is based in part on the papers of an actual relative and family tales of the war absorbed from her youth. There is little doubt that what she has absorbed are the traditional ideas the story of the war has engendered in many an imaginative soul. The novel is filled with incidents and a few facts to question. Is there such a thing as a part mule and are the fireflies active in Mississippi at Christmas time? But these are merely quibbles. McMullan's novel is a well-written, very traditional novel about the war that should satisfy most young readers.

*Larry Olpin is Professor Emeritus of English from Central Missouri State University and is at work on an endless manuscript on fiction of the Civil War from 1950 to 2000. He can be reached at [olpin@socket.net](mailto:olpin@socket.net).*