

Savannah, or a Gift for Mr. Lincoln

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Review

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Jakes, John *Savannah, or A Gift for Mr. Lincoln*. Dutton, \$23.95 hardcover
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Surrendered Savannah

Author assembles diverse cast

John Jakes's recently released novel, recounting the surrender of Savannah in December, 1864, moves quickly--just as the events of that day sped--through many stories of citizens and soldiers of both sides caught up in the momentous pause in the Civil War before the attack on South Carolina and the eventual surrender at Appomattox.

When Jakes tells a story, it is indeed a tale, one that bristles with cleanly drawn characters, dramatic situations created with attention to period detail, and a central focus on actual historic events while also bringing in the context: the terrain, the average person's life, the families and children of the central players. The reader is there, smelling the smoke, tasting the fish, and pulling for the protagonists to quell their antagonists. Jakes's books, including the Kent Chronicles, the North and South trilogy, *Homeland*, and many others, have been consecutive *New York Times* bestsellers. As with those books, Jakes has thoroughly researched the events and characters of the time, and has compellingly woven their tales around the historic event. In this case, the South was suffering after the fall of Atlanta and feeling the effects of fighting the Union for four years with far fewer men and vastly inferior resources than the enemy. Their terrific human resources and compelling cause--the ability to outfox and outmaneuver the Union forces and the advantages of fighting on home ground--had taken the South so far, but the realities set in. While some residents of the area continued to be die-hard secessionists, more and more were willing to admit the uselessness of trying to battle while their plantations were ruined, their slaves liberated, and their men away at war. Average citizens were starving. In this account, the surrender is carried out with apparent civility, and

the Union actually helps Savannah celebrate Christmas.

In **Savannah, or A Gift for Mr. Lincoln**, Jakes weaves a tale that includes characters as diverse as a young widow and her 12 year-old daughter, Hattie, the book's heroine; Isaiah Fleeg, a New Jersey-based bounty hunter capturing ex-slaves and turning them over to the army for the \$300-per-head reward; Alpheus Winks, a reformed Union bummer; Stephen Hopewell, a Union officer-reporter who sheds insight into the practice of journalism before imbedded reporters; Union General William Sherman, who encounters a feisty Hattie in an improbable shin-busting episode; and many, many others. As a reader, one is carried along quickly, learning all the time about the period's language, customs, and dilemmas, such as the fear of war-time "outrages" against women, the concern of Hattie's Aunt Vee, an educated but apparently frustrated virgin.

Jakes gives close attention to an incident of the war that shows the complicated feelings of Northern soldiers toward the blacks they liberated. He describes the crossing of Ebenezer Creek, where a Union pontoon bridge is pulled up after soldiers and their cattle have crossed, marooning the hundreds of freed slaves who've been following during Sherman's March to the Sea. While Sherman is not there, his general, Jeff C. Davis, is held responsible for not rescuing the blacks who drowned in their attempt to swim across. This incident, and many other details, such as Union-sponsored Christmas giveaways in Savannah and the sending of foodstuffs to the city from Northern citizens to relieve hunger, make **Savannah** a rewarding read. As a historical fiction writer, I greatly admire Jakes's ability to render a military order or an official record more much interesting than the actual document.

Jakes succeeds in spinning all these different stories at the same time; they are interwoven with great dexterity, never leaving the reader to wonder if the author knows where the story is going. Characters and their dilemmas engage us, and we're curious to see how they resolve in the end. Reading John Jakes novels, one knows there are going to be many characters and many events, and that in the end the reader will have more of a feel for a time and a place and a given historical situation than many straight historians are able to convey.

My only issues with **Savannah** are the overdrawn character of Vee, whom Jakes suggests is almost hoping for the Yankees' reputed "outrages" against herself, and the incomplete portrayal of Zip, an ex-slave Winks pulls from

Ebenezer Creek. I think Vee's portrayal is inaccurate, and while others in the book are also overplayed and are simplified, her depiction suggests women of that day felt incomplete without a man. Such hysterical women as Vee possibly existed, but there were others like Mary Gay, a poet and spinster, who walked 15 miles in a day to deliver Union newspapers sewn in her petticoats to Confederate headquarters, risking charges of treason and, potentially, death. Still others ran households, aided the children in the family, and tried to keep up appearances and stave off hunger with the aptly depicted root teas and dinner drawn from the creek, as in Hattie's catch of crab. Zip, the black man, is habitually subservient: On Page 147, Zip is told a conversation is private: The dismissal sent the colored boy scuttling. While behavior toward whites--Union or Confederate--was usually deferential, this was often balanced with more dignified behavior, and it seems a shame that this other side was not depicted. When writing an entertaining story, it's sometimes necessary to draw caricatures, but these seemed to go a bit far.

Jakes always informs and enlightens us with his excellent skills in pulling together the period events, personalities, and background that go into his tales. Certainly, he has invigorated the genre of historical fiction as applied to the Civil War and American history, and he's inspired a number of writers, myself included, to use fiction as a vehicle to conjure up a time and a place and to take a new look at a period clothed in mystery or misunderstanding. As in the Ebenezer Creek incident or in the recounting of gifts distributed to the children of Savannah, it's helpful to shed more light on an event that may not have received enough attention in the intervening years. Through such retelling, we get to learn even more lessons from the past, lessons that can help point the way to the future by acknowledging the light along with the dark of our past, as Jakes puts it. Hopefully, there'll be many more books from him to light the way.

Estelle Ford-Williamson, who writes in the Atlanta area, is author of Abbeville Farewell: A Novel of Early Atlanta and North Georgia. Her articles and stories have appeared in literary journals, and she is working on a second novel, Rising Fawn. She can be reached at fordwilliams@hotmail.com