

Baptism at Bull Run

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Review

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Reger, James P. *Baptism at Bull Run*. Harbor House, \$24.95, hardcover ISBN 1891799142

Valor in high definition

An obituary for American innocence

Okay. Here's my perspective on book reviews. You don't know me from Adam's housecat, so why should you give a good golly-darn whether or not I like the book I'm reviewing? Well, you shouldn't. So what I am going to do is try to help you decide whether or not you or someone you know would like **Baptism at Bull Run**.

If you are a fan of vivid descriptions of battlefield action, you'll love it. Vivid is a word far too often used in reviewing such work, but in this case it is more than appropriate. Particularly compelling is a description of the brutal duties of the file closers, and a heart-rending moment when killing became up close and personal. This is the day that innocence died in America, and Mr. Reger has written a compelling obituary. His ability to turn a phrase and capture a moment can border on brilliant. He has, however, fallen in love with two words used so often as to be distracting. They are Unionists and barrelita, the latter may appear more in this book than in all other books combined over the last 100 years.

If you are a serious Civil War enthusiast (and since you are reading this column on this site, I assume that you are), then I have to tell you that Mr. Reger didn't write this book for you. Every historical novelist must decide how much his readers already know, and Reger decided that they probably know absolutely nothing. It is a very good primer of Civil War history, and beginners will enjoy it and learn from it, but genuine aficionados will most likely be offended by the belaboring of the legendary anecdotes we've all heard a thousand times before. As a result, the great men of history are often reduced to caricatures. We are

repeatedly reminded how fat was General Scott, how nervous was Colonel Sherman, and how idiosyncratic was General Jackson. Stonewall rarely appears without a hand in the air or a peach in his mouth. Reger's depiction of Colonel Nathan Shanks Evans seems particularly unkind. Many Southerners of the day considered Evans the Hero of First Manassas, and, while he was undoubtedly profane, impetuous and hard-drinking, Reger paints him as vulgar, insubordinate, and drunk. One of novelists' most vital tools, introspection, is seldom taken from the tool box.

Because I call it a primer, don't assume that it is appropriate for juveniles. There is gratuitous sex (darn those Rebel spies in Washington Town), and the language is often foul. Reger may be right, and I may be wrong, but the profanity sounds to me more like World War II Marines than Civil War soldiers. From time to time the F word fills the air like MiniΘ balls. Give it a rating of PG-13.

Civil War expert or novice, you will need to provide your own maps. **Baptism at Bull Run** has none, and suffers greatly from it.

There are degrees or subcategories of historical fiction. In historical drama the author creates a fictitious universe, peoples it with fictitious characters and uses historical events as the catalyst for conflict. Concern for historical accuracy fluctuates wildly from author to author. At the other extreme is history as fiction, (my favorite) where there are few if any fictitious characters or events. This is a literary reenactment, if you will, with significant attention paid to historical detail from Presidents to privates. The more common form of the genre is a blend of the two in which some characters are real and well-researched, but others, to some degree or another, are born from the imagination of the author. I believe this is the case with **Baptism at Bull Run**. This approach enables the author to minimize the number of characters the reader has to follow, but it comes at a cost of historical accuracy. These composite characters tend to become a dumping ground for exaggerated stereotypes of all sorts, and while that is true of Reger's work, he does it well. The characters who I assume to be fictitious are compelling and complicated individuals, each with a unique perspective and a different reaction to seeing the elephant, most (obviously) for the first time. His writing skills again carry the day. You can smell the fear.

Mr. Reger brings to his trade a background in scholarship. He is a high school history teacher with several nonfiction works to his credit. **Baptism at Bull Run** is his first novel.

Richard Croker is the author of To Make Men Free, A Novel of the Battle of Antietam (William Morrow/HarperCollins, 2004). The sequel, No Greater Courage, A Novel of the Battle of Fredericksburg is due out in March, 2006 from the same publisher. Croker is an independent documentary filmmaker who lives in Marietta, Georgia.