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Elkhorn Tavern

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Review

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Jones, Douglas C. *Elkhorn Tavern*. New American Library, \$15.00 ISBN 978-0-451-23185-7

A Family's Struggle on the Frontier

Douglas Jones brings two gigantic themes in American literature together—the raw struggle for survival on the American frontier and the grand martial conflict of the American Civil War—and he successfully weaves them into one seamless story. Set amongst the hazy ridges and hardwood-shadowed valleys of Arkansas, *Elkhorn Tavern* is perhaps Jones's most ambitious novel to date. Known for his stories of the American West, Jones turns his attention to the largest of American stages, bringing together all of the elements he is best known for: unforgettable characters, original well-oiled prose, and a compelling story line that draws readers into it seamlessly without any guile.

Elkhorn Tavern is mainly the story of Ora Hasford, a simple, hard-working farmer's wife who finds herself in a complicated situation while her husband is away at war. Specifically, she must protect her two children, animals, and few possessions from Confederate and Union armies that clash in protracted battle below Pea Ridge near their homestead. The battle results in a literal parade of characters both good and evil who inevitably approach their farm for anything ranging from a simple drink of water to all of the things that desperate men seek in desperate situations.

In telling the story, Jones accomplishes something very difficult in literature: he utilizes a character (the absent father, Martin Hasford) that never makes a physical appearance in the story, and yet who still is able to impact the plot and all of the major characters in ways that make the story real and compelling. Through Ora, her children, and family acquaintances, the reader literally feels as if they actually know Martin Hasford. In time-honored fashion, the son, Roman, also becomes the father as the story progresses.

The level of historical detail present throughout the novel is impressive, and for those interested in the actual battle of Pea Ridge, the novel will have particularly interesting points of view. Seen through the eyes of the younger son, Roman, and his older sister, Calpurnia, the reader has numerous vantage points all over the physical landscape of the battlefield that brings to life the familiar landmarks and historical accounts. Although the truth of the experience in a novel must ultimately belong to the fictional characters, as much as to history, Jones's historical facts are in good order, and detailed in enough abundance to be of interest to a wide audience of readers, including those who know enough to catch factual errors should they occur.

Jones's somewhat clipped and occasionally stark prose will not win him comparisons with romantics or accolades from the most serious literary critics, but it is a perfect mirror reflection of the frontier environment and war-torn characters that push the story along in a satisfying manner, and will keep readers engaged. In summary, *Elkhorn Tavern* is well-written, entertaining, and a noteworthy addition to the genre of 21st century Civil War fiction.

Jack Trammell teaches at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. He is a frequent speaker and writer on Civil War topics, and has a keen interest in Civil War literature.