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Silent We Stood

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Review

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Chappell, Henry *Silent We Stood*. Texas Tech University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 9780896728325

A Novel of the Underground Railroad in Texas

Henry Chappell, author of *Blood Kin* and *The Callings*, fresh uses of the Western genre, has based *Silent We Stood* on actual events, which he describes in a preface. On Sunday, July 8, 1860, twenty-five establishments around the town square in Dallas burned. The fire was later determined to have started in the kindling box of a drug store, but suspicion that some whites among the 775 citizens were conducting an underground railroad and long-festering fear of an insurrection among the 1700 slaves in the county put the blame on three, and they were hanged.

Eight of the twenty-three characters are historical figures, of whom only Samuel Smith, one of the hanged, is among the six main characters. He is a freedman posing as the slave of Joseph Shaw, coffin-maker.

Bekah is a violent, resourceful, maimed runaway slave from Alabama, whose husband was murdered and whose son escaped to the north. Samuel, much in need of a woman, falls in love with her, without telling her he has secretly bought her freedom. But Peter, one of the slaves Samuel rescues, gets to her first.

Joseph Shaw is a veteran of the Underground Railroad in Kentucky, southern Ohio, Kansas, and Missouri. Only after his best friend, Reverend Ignatius Bodeker, and Rachel Bodeker "convinced him to move to the vilest, darkest corner of the South did he feel he could be tested." An indecisive, somewhat reluctant rescuer, he is tormented by his recent inactivity. Joseph had "waited until border men... and the fugitives themselves forced them to act... How many fugitives could they have helped in the past three years?"

Reverend Ignatius Bodeker is a “rotund, melancholic minister from western Virginia, who has settled in Dallas after years of antislavery work in Kansas.” He feels ineffectual, but his sermons delve deep. “To sit idle in the presence of brazen evil is to invite damnation.” Parson Newton and Jonah Chambers are dangerously reckless Yankee abolitionists who reproach Bodeker. “Your vagueness appalls me,” Newton tells Reverend Bodeker. “Say what you mean or step aside for a stouter man of God.” Bodeker feels guilty when he doesn't even try to stop “gentle Pig” Nuchols from murdering a slave-catcher who has identified both of them as slave rescuers. He knows he is not like Pig who would protect his own family “at any cost.”

Bodeker's wife, Rachel, a “fierce, erudite abolitionist from Maryland,” is Joseph's passionately sexual lover, pregnant with his child. She tells Joseph that she is “Pathetic, ridiculous, revolting, wicked.” She kissed him again. “Wretched, debased, degraded harridan. I'll surely get what I deserve.”

This secret, very close-knit group includes Pig Nuchols, “frontier abolitionist from eastern Tennessee, veteran of the war with Mexico.” Other characters come and go, agitators, runaway slaves, and slave-catchers--some in darkness only, some in broad daylight.

In uncommon ways, Chappell imagines and creates complex characters, relationships, and events that give vividly detailed and impressions of slavery as one of the major causes of the Civil War, during the year before it began, and so in that sense his is a Civil War novel.

But among Chappell's achievements is his creation of a genuine sense of community in small southern towns such as Dallas. As Joseph is about to flee, “He felt a sudden fierce affection for the town he'd soon be leaving.” Coming to arrest Samuel and Bekah, a neighbor tells Joseph, “I hate it. I hate it. But what's a man to do?” Everyday interactions among both whites and slaves are far more than simply civil. That is shown especially during the fire and soon after as citizens and slaves give aid and comfort to each other, and even as town fathers, assuming slaves set the fire, aggressively search for the culprits.

Chappell often expresses the prevailing ambivalent attitudes on both sides. Slave rescuers Joseph and Rachel are contemptuous of “Old Man Brown and his collection of lunatics.” Reverend Bodeker feels that whether slaves make it to freedom or not, it's because of God's will, not his own success or failure. He

thinks the two outside abolitionists set the fire: "No one else could conjure enough reckless, self-righteous outrage. ... his urgings for caution had gone unheeded by two ridiculous, vainglorious preachers, and now caution was no longer an option." Even dedicated slave-catcher Amos Potts "disliked slave-owners in general."

As slave-rescuer, the father expresses a feeling reminiscent of some Civil Rights workers of the 1960s. "Sometimes I felt I played the role too easily, and I sensed in Levin an unease or distrust, as if he suspected my racial makeup imbued me with a gift for tyranny." He tells the daughter, "Some take more pleasure in revenge against perpetrators of injustice than in aiding the oppressed." He "hated slavery, not my own people. I would not wage war against them nor participate in their humiliation."

Chappell expresses a spectrum of feelings that slaves have about whites. On the plantation Bekah saw only about five whites. "Then you run away and all you see is white people." She saw the "shaggy, luxuriant winter coats on the cattle and horses in the pastures—and then her own thin, wet dress draped about her waist." Referring to Joseph, Bekah tells Samuel, "Might as well say, 'I don't trust you even though you're risking your life helping fugitive slaves.'" Samuel says, "Leave legal murder to men of position."

Chapters dealing with interrogations, beatings, and torture of most of the 1000 Dallas County slaves, especially passages describing the gruesome, prolonged torture of Samuel and his beloved Rebekah, express the deeply underlying capability for committing inhuman acts that characterize antebellum culture and will erupt on both sides during the war that began the next year. "Everybody's watching everybody."

Chappell devotes so much space, from start to finish, to the sexual experiences of Joseph and Rachel and of Samuel and Bekah that one may wonder what it has to do with slavery, unless one regards it as symbolic of the passion and violence of slave-catching and slave-rescue and the war soon to be declared.

Chappell's detailed, broad canvas includes grotesquely comic scenes. Fearful that they are finally about to be exposed, Joseph and his friends prepare to escape, concealing a runaway slave under the wagon boards, but first Joseph must make a coffin and quickly bury a beloved black preacher. As dogs

approach the cemetery following the slave's scent, Joseph dumps the preacher out of the coffin, puts the slave inside, and buries him on top of the preacher, hoping to throw the dogs off track.

The reader experiences Chappell's superb story-telling talent in 65 chapters of from one to six pages, interspersed with seven very short passages of "Father's Reminiscences," dictated to Bekah's daughter in 1911. "I set a fire that condemned" three men "to the noose in order to save" the life of his best friend, a slave who was about to get caught. The father's brief memoir passages open and close the complex but fast-paced time and space structure of the novel. Chappell's use of the omniscient point of view technique is myriad-minded, as he shifts focus back and forth among the five major characters.

What causes all of the elements of this novel to rise to an unusually high level is Chappell's brilliant style. Simple but evocative, his style is one of the pure pleasures of reading the novel. "Philip said nothing but kept turning to look back at the bed of the hearse. The brim of his hat rubbed against Joseph's shoulder." The second sentence creates the effect. With such detail, he conveys a character's sense of the movement of another, as in this example also: "Rachel lay quiet. At last, he heard her measured breath and the whisper of her eyelashes as she blinked." By delaying two words to the end of the sentence, we feel the suddenness of Joseph's shock. "Joseph walked around the side of the wagon and lifted the tarp. At once, two flies found the dried blood on Teddy's shirt collar and slit throat."

More than many Civil War novelists, Chappell is fully in command of the art of fiction. To contrast Joseph's response to violence against slaves, Chappell uses the device of juxtaposition. Feeling the eyes of maimed slaves upon him causes "the skin on his back" to tighten "like scabrous wounds." Chappell juxtaposes that line to "Images flashed: thick, hard scars, the nubs on Bekah's hand," where two fingers had been hacked off. For Bekah the miasma from the river bottom is a metaphor for the ambience of slavery. "You breathe in that miasma and it gets all over your insides." To express a parallel of her feelings to Joseph's, Chappell juxtaposes that line to "Joseph, feverish and chilled, dreamed of being buried alive."

Especially memorable are the chapters describing the town on fire and the responses of the people; the torture of Bekah and Samuel, who is innocent of setting the fire but who confesses to save her; Joseph, Samuel, and Bekah hiding

a runaway mother and child, both of whom die; and a chapter delineating the vacillating mentality of Reverend Boedeker.

Ending on a personal note, I am eager to say that, as a Civil War novelist and historian, I regard *Silent We Stood* as being among the finest Civil War novels I have ever read.

Founding director of the United States Civil War Center and creator of the Civil War Book Review, David Madden is the author of many works of fiction, including Sharpshooter, about the Civil War, and the forthcoming collection of essays new and old, The Tangled Web of the Civil War and Reconstruction. David@davidmadden.net; davidmadden.net