

## The Disagreement

Jack Trammell

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## Review

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**Taylor, Nick** *The Disagreement*. Simon & Schuster, \$24.95 hardcover ISBN 1416550655

### A Look Back at the Civil War

Civil War novels face the unenviable task of being good literature and convincing history, due to the wealth of common knowledge and high interest Americans have in the time period. Nick Taylor's debut novel earns passing marks in both areas, and avoids the major pitfalls that commonly beset many other would-be Civil War novelists.

Taylor's story centers around a young medical student in Charlottesville, Virginia, named John Muro, who forgoes the family business in Lynchburg to set his own path in life. Taylor relays the story through a long series of vignette-like chapters told in first person that have the feel of a personal diary. Muro is clearly a thoughtful and gifted young man, but he is also brash and impulsive, and the disintegration of his family in the fires of war sets the stage for his own bumpy coming of age.

Taylor's prose is intelligent and quirky—evoking the historical time, but understated enough to avoid drawing a critical eye. As the book unfolds, it becomes increasingly evident that the narrator is telling the story from a bird's eye view decades later, and the word-choice is that of a seasoned and sometimes cynical adult looking back on his life with a mixture of sentimentality and pain. Still, the naivety and optimism of youth spills forth from Muro at times, reminding the reader of the universality of youth and the timelessness of love.

With the exception of Lorrie Wigfall, Muro's future wife, the remaining characters in the book are sometimes less than memorable. Muro's family members, his mentor Dr. Cabell, his first successful patient and later friend, Union Lieutenant Henry Stone—all remain underdeveloped characters that flirt

with being trapped inside of antebellum stereotypes. Muro's cousin Sam serves as case in point. Sam wins his Aunt and Uncle's trust, takes over the family business in Lynchburg, and even successfully woos Muro's sister, Parthenia, but then mysteriously manumits the slave labor force and drives the business into the ground. The reader just doesn't know enough or care enough about Sam to understand his actions. One notable exception is Muro's rich and flamboyant planter friend B.B. who often becomes more interesting than the narrator himself, both to the reader as well as to the character of Lorrie Wigfall. B.B. parties, philanders and waxes eloquent, even holding a medieval jousting tournament on the grounds of Monticello. Nonetheless, the pathos surrounding Muro's early life and personal war-time crisis is what carries the other characters forward along the plotline.

Taylor is clearly a craftsman, and while this book has some small flaws, the overall success of it will be determined in large part by the fact that the standard is set so high for Civil War fiction. Civil War fiction must not only be good literature, but also must meet the scrutiny of an extremely literate Civil War audience. To give a small example from the story, Union Lieutenant Stone while a prisoner under Muro's care is exchanged in the late spring of 1864—it is awkward for the reader to assume that this could easily have happened after the known collapse of the exchange system in 1863, after which exchanges were rare and for long periods absolutely forbidden by Union authorities ranking as high as General U.S. Grant. Many other details, however, such as the herbal and local remedies Confederate doctors resorted to during the war, are accurate and very interesting.

In summary, though far from perfect, Taylor's book must be given a passing mark for its overall attention to historical detail. Alumni or those familiar with the University of Virginia will be particularly captivated by the local Civil War setting. Taylor has accomplished what many have set out to do and failed to accomplish: he has imagined, written, published, and shared with a wide audience a well-constructed Civil War novel.

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