

Voices

— AN ESSAY BY —

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In the summer of 2014, I was in the library near my home in rural South Carolina. I was doing research for a book I'd been trying to write on and off (mostly off). It can be a hellish experience for a writer when no amount of work on a project pays off in terms of the story taking flight, and that was the case with my draft about a middle-aged woman living on a farm during the Civil War. I seemed unable to locate the nexus of the story, what Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk so aptly refers to as “the secret center.”

On that July day, however, locked in the tiny, stifling History Room, I stumbled across the summary of an 1865 inquest. As soon as I read it, I knew this was a story begging to be told in novel form. A Confederate soldier who had been away from his teenaged wife for four years arrived home at war's end to confront rumors that his bride had become pregnant while he was away. It was alleged that she had given birth to a son who had been killed and buried on their farm. The baby's remains were unearthed, and the angry husband pushed to have his wife indicted for murder. The young woman refused to speak about the baby or to name the father. She maintained this silence for the rest of her life, even though she and her husband eventually reconciled.

I was electrified by the plight of this young woman and by the extraordinary courage she must have possessed to face this ordeal alone in a war-torn world. I gathered up my things and ran home from the library with the voice of a fictional soldier's wife, the second Mrs. Hockaday, already telling me her story and an entirely new novel taking shape around her voice. The rest of that summer is a blur in my memory. That's because writing this manuscript was the most intensely concentrated, inspiring, and creatively engaging process I have experienced in all my writing years. Writing the first draft of this novel, which I did in a period of twelve to fourteen weeks, was an

experience very similar to falling in love: I was unable to eat, sleep, or think productively about anything but the beloved. Pamuk also says that “the task of writing a novel is to imagine a world,” and the longer I spent time with Placidia Hockaday—as Holland Creek collapsed around her, the farm besieged by bummers, kidnappers, runaway servants, and slumming Charlestonians, and as her values shifted and she came to see the Confederacy’s lost cause for what it was—the more I felt I was closing in on the secret concealed at the heart of her dilemma. It lay in Placidia’s experience of the war as a woman, as someone her son Achilles describes long after her death as a lonely girl “whose spirit ruled her life, for good and ill.”

I DON’T REMEMBER consciously deciding how the novel would be written. It began writing itself as it wished to be, in the form of linked found pieces: the inquest record, letters to and from the main characters, and the diary that Placidia kept as she struggled on her own at Holland Creek, entries written on the backs of illustrations in her copy of *David Copperfield*. I suspect I was strongly drawn to the epistolary form by the dormant playwright in me. A decade of my life was spent writing and working in regional theater, and I think I wanted to steal some of the theater’s intimacy for this novel by allowing the characters’ voices to speak directly into the reader’s ear without narrative filters. Even a first-person viewpoint was too limiting in this context, because the story extends beyond Placidia’s death to include members of the next generation who are strongly affected by her revelations and by the legacy of the blue-eyed man who is her “darker kinsman.”

At the center of the novel is the love story of Placidia and Gryffth Hockaday. They enter into their marriage with a recklessness born out of wartime urgency, only to be parted almost immediately. Gryffth’s duties as a field officer in the 13th South Carolina regiment keep him far away in Virginia, while back at Holland Creek, Placidia struggles to cope not only with the endless tasks required in running a farm but with the disintegration of an entire society. Like the heroes in the ancient epics, she is rewarded for her journey of sacrifice and struggle with knowledge. But that knowledge comes at a terrible price.

Gryffth pays dearly for his own survival on the bloody fields of Gettysburg and Spotsylvania, with Placidia telling her cousin Mildred that he

“won’t allow his suffering to have meaning.” When he returns, the two of them must find a way to regain trust and rebuild their lives in spite of their damaged hearts. They must also redefine their dependency on and kinship with the enslaved people at Holland Creek, African-Americans who are carving out new roles for themselves in the chaotic aftermath of the Civil War. Placidia and Gryffth must reconcile themselves not merely to a changed marriage, but to a changed world.

WRITING IS HARD, lonely work for the most part. But when it is fueled by inspiration, and when the stories begin falling headlong onto the page like treasures spilling from a buried chest, it is the most purely ecstatic experience most writers are ever likely to experience. That might be why it’s so difficult to put a novel to rest once it’s finally complete, accepting that the characters you’ve become so intimately familiar with will have to carry on without you. Crouching beside Placidia in her room at dawn, scrubbing blood off the walls before the servants arrive at her farmhouse, I felt the beauty, the anguish, and the paradoxically fragile power of her existence in my fictional world. For that short time before the sun rose over the ridge, I shared the secret center with her. And it was heaven.