



The Widow of the South: a novel
by Robert Hicks

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Summary

Reminiscent of "Cold Mountain" and "Enemy Women," Robert Hicks' gripping debut novel, based on the incredible true story of Carrie McGavock--a woman whose life was forever changed by the Civil War--is exquisitely packaged with endpapers and compelling interior photographs.

Description

In an extraordinary debut novel, based on a remarkable true story, Robert Hicks draws an unforgettable, panoramic portrait of a woman who, through love and loss, found a cause. Known throughout the country as "the Widow of the South," Carrie McGavock gave her heart first to a stranger, then to a tract of hallowed ground - and became a symbol of a nation's soul. The novel flashes back thirty years to the afternoon of the Battle of Franklin, five of the bloodiest hours of the Civil War. There were 9,200 casualties that fateful day. Carrie's home - the Carnton plantation - was taken over by the Confederate army and turned into a hospital; four generals lay dead on her back porch; the pile of amputated limbs rose as tall as the smoke house. And when a wounded soldier named Zachariah Cashwell arrived and awakened feelings she had thought long dead, Carrie found herself inexplicably drawn to him despite the boundaries of class and decorum. The story that ensues between Carrie and Cashwell is just as unforgettable as the battle from which it is drawn.

Reviews

From Publishers Weekly

Hicks's big historical first novel, based on true events in his hometown, follows the saga of Carrie McGavock, a lonely Confederate wife who finds purpose transforming her Tennessee plantation into a hospital and cemetery during the Civil War. Carrie is mourning the death of several of her children, and, in the absence of her husband, has left the care of her house to her capable Creole slave Mariah. Before the 1864 battle of Franklin, Confederate Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest commandeers her house as a field hospital. In alternating points of view, the battle is recounted by different witnesses, including Union Lt. Nathan Stiles, who watches waves of rebels shot dead, and Confederate Sgt. Zachariah Cashwell, who loses a leg. By the end of the battle, 9,000 soldiers have perished, and thousands of Confederates are buried in a field near the McGavock plantation. Zachariah ends up in Carrie's care at the makeshift hospital, and their rather chaste love forms the emotional pulse of the novel, while Carrie fights to relocate the buried soldiers when her wealthy neighbor threatens to plow up the field after the war. Valiantly, Hicks returns to small, human stories in the midst of an epic catastrophe. Though occasionally overwrought, this impressively researched novel will fascinate aficionados.

From Booklist

Starred Review Carrie McGavock witnessed the Battle of Franklin in Tennessee, on a day in 1864 when 9,000 soldiers were slaughtered, the vast majority of them Confederate. Carrie, the central character in this mesmerizing novel, was an actual historical figure. Her farm was close by the scene of the battle, and her house was commandeered as a makeshift hospital. And what Carrie the fictional character does after the battle, the actual Carrie did in real life. When more than 1,000 Confederate bodies buried in a neighboring field were threatened with desecration, she and her husband moved them to their own land and organized the only private Confederate cemetery. The brewing of the battle, its events, and the wound-healing time afterward are told by Hicks not only from Carrie's perspective but also from the points of view of Mariah, Carrie's slave-turned-friend; Carrie's plantation-owning husband; Union and Confederate soldiers and officers; and Carrie's neighbors. The author gracefully yet forcefully enters the psychology of these various individuals, each one representing a certain side in not only the battle at hand but also in the overarching context of nation rearing.

"A thunderous, action-rich first novel...worthy of a place alongside *The Killer Angels*, *Rifles for Watie*, and *Shiloh*." —**Kirkus Reviews**

Biography



Robert Hicks was born and raised in South Florida. In 1974 he moved to Williamson County, Tennessee; in 1979 he moved to 'Labor in Vain,' a late-eighteenth-century log cabin, near Leiper's Fork, Tennessee.

Hicks has been active in the music industry in Nashville for twenty years as both a music publisher and artist manager. The driving force behind the perservation and restoration of the historic Carnton plantation in Tennessee, he stumbled upon the extraordinary role that Carrie McGavock played during and after the Battle of Franklin.

Bibliography

A Separate Country (novel, 2009)

Widow of the South (novel, 2005)

Hicks' first book, a collaboration with French-American photographer Michel Arnaud, *Nashville: the Pilgrims of Guitar Town* (non-fiction, 2000)

He is co-editor (with Justin Stelter and John Bohlinger) of a collection of short stories, *A Guitar and A Pen: Short Stories and Story-Songs By Nashville Songwriters*

BookReporter.com Interview 2005

Q: In real life, what do you think was Carrie's motivation for digging up the bodies and reburying them in her backyard?

RH :As I say in my author's notes, the original gravesites could not be properly maintained where they were. The McGavocks, and those in the community, who joined in the effort, were trying to protect and preserve it from oblivion. She had watched many of these boys die in her house, in her own beds, on her own floor.

I don't think we need Dr. Freud to explain Carrie's role in the site design as you see the graves of the dead boys extending out from the family cemetery where her own children were buried. Truth is, the cemetery itself became an extension of their family cemetery. Giving credence to this argument is the all-telling detail that neither John nor Carrie McGavock ever deeded nor legally separated the military cemetery from the rest of the farm. Though they had 30 to 40 years, respectively, to separate the cemeteries, they never did so. Account, after account, tell of her daily pilgrimages to the cemetery and how she carried the cemetery book on her at all

times; and yet, she didn't consider the future of the cemetery and deed it to some patriotic organization? Point is, both she and John died believing they had provided for the future of the cemetery forever. I am convinced that she believed her family would be taking care of it for all time because, to her, it was her family cemetery just as much as the plot where her own children were buried.

Q: How much research did you need to do before you wrote the book? What did it entail?

RH: A good seven years of Russian novels and countless accounts of the Civil War and ante and post-bellum American history. The book's bibliography sums up my attempt at research.

Q: How long did it take you to write the novel?

RH: Seven years of reading, research, and failed 'starts' and two years of actual writing.

Q: How historically accurate is the novel? For instance, were the generals real, did the battle take place the way you depicted it? Was there someone named Cotton Gin? Were the town dynamics as you portrayed them? And if so, how were you able to know so much information about people and events that happened such a long time ago.

RH: Carrie, John, their children, Mariah and a host of others in the story did very much live. The generals are very much real --- six of them were killed at Franklin. Some of the other characters are composites of others that lived then. While I make no claim to be a historian, the battle I described is as close as I was able to understand it from both the excellent narrative accounts and histories that have survived and from gleaning details from the more enlightened men and women I'm surrounded by. But in the end, don't be tricked, there remains a reason why it says 'A Novel' on the cover.

Q: Have you read any of Carrie's letters that she wrote to the soldiers' families? What was her voice like?

RH: To date, I have never read any of the many letters that are attributed to her hand as not one of them has ever surfaced. One of my greatest hopes is that with this book, they will begin to emerge from old trunks and attics as her story comes before the public --- that the day will come when ebay is covered with them.

Interview with the Author from Reading Group Guides.com

I was born and raised in South Florida. My parents filled our home with books. When I was sick and stayed home from school, my dad would give me volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica or Bartlett's Familiar Quotations to cuddle up in bed with, instead of a diet of TV. Books were held to be sacred and precious. Christmases and birthdays were always times of book-giving and book-receiving. One of the first books to have a lasting impact on me (beyond the Bible, which seems to have anchored every Southern home of my generation) was Richard Halliburton's Complete Book of Marvels. I still attribute my passion for travel and adventure to the nights I fell asleep reading of Halliburton's world-wide adventures.

In high school I discovered biography, reading books about Robert E. Lee, NICHOLAS AND ALEXANDER and the CONFESSIONS by St. Augustine to name a few. This passion for biography has continued through the years with books like Peter Guralnick's two-volume biography of Elvis; to a recent read, SURVIVING THE CONFEDERACY, about Roger and Sarah Pryor. While my taste ranges from Smith's VITRUVIUS ON ARCHITECTURE to John Ruskin's THE STONES OF VENICE, I can get hooked on popular culture like anyone else and was absorbed enough after reading John Berendt's MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL to make the mandatory pilgrimage to Savannah. In 1974 I moved to Williamson County, Tennessee [www.historicfranklin.com]. Then in 1979 I moved to 'Labor in Vain,' a late-eighteenth-century log cabin on the edge of the woods, in a hollow near Leiper's Fork, Tennessee.

Born out of my passion for this life – throughout all the ages, I'm a collector, by nature. I've collected since I was a kid. It began with fossilized shells from our driveway to rocks and leaves and baseball cards to books, 18th century maps of Tennessee, Tennesseana in general, Southern decorative arts and material culture, to Outsider Art. I am surrounded by collections. A friend says the next thing I bring home must come with a crow bar to get it into my cabin. My older brother once said that I'd "inherited more of the 'hunter-gatherer' genes than most other kids."

I served as co-curator (with Ben Caldwell and Mark Scala) on the exhibition, Art of Tennessee, at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville. The exhibition was a seven-year endeavor from conception at my kitchen table to its opening in September 2003. I was co-editor of the exhibition's award-winning catalog, Art of Tennessee (UT Press, September 2003).

In the field of historic preservation, I have served on the Boards of Historic Carnton Plantation [www.carnton.org], the Tennessee State Museum, The Williamson County Historical Society, and the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts. [www.oldsalem.org/about/mesda.htm] For the past two years, I've headed up Franklin's Charge: A Vision and Campaign for the Preservation of Historic Open Space [www.franklinscharge.com] in the fight to secure and preserve both battlefield and other historic open space in Williamson County. Franklin's Charge has taken on the massive mission of saving what remains of the eastern flank of the battlefield at Franklin – the largest remaining undeveloped fragment of the battlefield – and turning it into public battlefield park. NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC's, April 2005 issue has an article entitled 'Civil War Then and Now' that speaks of Franklin's Charge's work in battlefield reclamation, calling Franklin the "most unjustly forgotten" of "all the Civil war's major engagements."

Discussion Questions from Reading Group Guides.com

1. It seems that Carrie doesn't come alive until literally everyone around her is dying. Why do you think it took her home being taken over by the Confederate Army and turned into a hospital to awaken Carrie out of her stupor?
2. Do you believe that Zachariah really wanted to die when he picked up the colors on the battlefield? Why does Nathan Stiles spare Zachariah on the battlefield specifically, when others carrying the colors were killed? Is Zachariah grateful to be spared, or is he regretful, or a little of both, and why?
3. Does John McGavock undergo a character transformation from the beginning of the novel, when he and Theopolis encounter the gang of ruffians in the woods, to the end, when we see scenes him of him wandering around Franklin somewhat aimlessly? How do you think he views the war? How do you think he views his role, or his non-role, in the war? And how does this compare with Carrie's attitude towards the war?
4. In the author's note Robert Hicks says of Mariah, "... I have concluded that Mariah may well have been the most complete human of them all." Mariah never let her enslavement define her. Do you agree?
5. Discuss how the death of their children affected both Carrie and John. What is the difference between the attachment mothers and fathers have with their children? Do you think

John would have begun drinking whether his children had died or not? And do you think Carrie had a propensity for eccentricity and seclusion?

6. When Carrie first notices Zachariah in her upstairs guest room, she remarks: "Unlike most of the men, he looked ready to die. He looked as if he were welcoming it, urging it along...I wanted his eyes on me." Why does Carrie take to Zachariah, and why does she later give him special treatment? Do you think it was purely physical attraction? Does Zachariah's welcoming of his own death conflict with Carrie's values?

7. Faith plays a large part in each character's motivations. Discuss the role of belief in a higher power and how it guides Carrie, Zachariah, and Mariah in their actions. For most of us, our belief system changes or 'grows' over the span of our lives, one way or the other. How did Carrie's faith change over the span of the novel?

8. Why do you think Carrie beats Zachariah on the porch? Were you surprised by this or did you understand it?

9. Zachariah and Carrie have an intense love affair yet it's never consummated sexually. Do you think the fact they never were physically intimate takes away or adds to their relationship, or does it matter?

10. At one point Carrie tells Mariah, "You always could have left, even when you weren't allowed. I would have never stopped you." Do you think this is true? Carrie seems to think of Mariah as her best friend, but she was really her property, a "gift" her father gave to her as a child. Do you think Carrie tries to make herself appear a better friend/owner than she really was? Discuss Carrie and Mariah's relationship. Could friendship really transcend enslavement?

11. Among the political issues leading up to the Civil War was the South's strong adherence to the doctrine of 'state's rights.' Among the issues to come out of the war was the emancipation of the enslaved in the 'slave states,' whether they had remained loyal to the union or had seceded and joined the Confederacy. Yet, neither of these political issues is ever addressed 'head-on' in the book. Why do you think that is?

12. Carrie comes from a rich, educated family. She is "learned." Zachariah is poor, and almost illiterate. Yet do you think one is wiser than the other?

13. Robert Hicks has said, "good writing is about transformation." We see transformation in Carrie, Zechariah and in their relationship, in John, in his and Carrie's relationship, in Mariah and her relationship with Carrie. Are we left with any sense that Mr. Baylor ever comes to any real peace about what has happened?

14. What does Carrie mean when she says the following to Zachariah: "You are my key. You will explain things I have not been able to understand...I want you to explain to me why I wanted you to live and why I was able to make you live. Because I don't understand, not really, and the answer is very important to me." What is Carrie not able to understand about herself, and what answer does she think Zachariah will be able to provide?

15. Carrie takes Eli into her home and he quickly assumes the role of a surrogate son and Winder's surrogate brother. How do Carrie's actions speak to her changing perceptions of family? Has her work running the hospital changed her maternal instincts or is she simply responding to the nature of war?

16. At the town party, Carrie remarks about how she doesn't fit in with the other women; Mrs. McEwen pokes fun of her efforts and jokingly calls her "St. 17. In 1894, after John has died, and Mariah, Carrie and Zachariah are all elderly, why does Zachariah not profess his love for Carrie more overtly? Over time, did his love become more of respect and admiration for her heroism, or are his feelings for her just as romantically intense?

For Further Reading

Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain*

Geraldine Brooks, *March*

E.L. Doctorow, *The March*

Donald McCaig, *Jacob's Ladder and Canaan*

Peter Charles Melman, *Landsman*

John Reed, *A Still Small Voice*

Howard Bahr *The Black Flower* (2000)

Paulette Jiles *Enemy Women* (2002)

Kaye Gibbons *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon* (1998)

Michael Shaara *The Killer Angels* (1974)