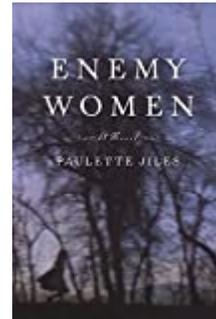




Paulette Jiles. *Enemy Women*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 2002. viii + 321 pp. \$13.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-06-093809-3; \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-621444-3.



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Historiographical Fiction

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Historians and novelists frequently sift through the same sands in their search for usable pasts, but differences in temperament and in professional culture often obscure their common cause. While eminent academics like Joel Williamson and Eugene Genovese pay homage to novelists William Faulkner and Ralph Ellison, citing them as both sources and interpreters, fiction writers who utilize historical works tend to obscure their debts and to relegate them to brief mention in back-page acknowledgements.[1] In her novel *Enemy Women*, Paulette Jiles graciously turns the tables, offering long, loving quotes not only from historical documents but from academic monographs as she describes the politicization of women during the bloody and turbulent Civil War in Missouri.

Jiles engages not merely in historical reconstruction but also in basic historiographical arguments, particularly in her utilization of Michael Fellman's extraordinary study of Civil War Missouri, *Inside War*. [2] Like Fellman, Jiles investigates the way Missourians turned upon each other during the war, destroying old connections

and moral standards. Like Fellman, she finds meaning not in the relation of this struggle to the greater war but in the changes it brought to Missourians.

In Jiles's narrative, these take form in the shape of Adair Colley, a young daughter of an Ozarkian justice of the peace. After Union-allied militia arrest her father on suspicion of aiding Confederates, Adair's brother joins Confederate guerrillas. Her continued contact with her brother after his enlistment leads her to be branded a sympathizer. She is arrested and imprisoned in St. Louis. There, her suffering in prison is alleviated by sympathetic visits with Union Major William Neumann, who oversees the jail and falls in love with Adair. When Neumann is sent to the front, Colley escapes from prison and works her way home by evading outlaws and Union sympathizers. As the novel closes, she returns to her Ozarks to find them changed utterly, while Neumann fights his way through guerrillas in his effort to find her.

By emphasizing the relationship between women and the state, Jiles contributes to another prominent strand of historiography about the war: the politicization of women. Like Drew Gilpin Faust, Victoria Bynum, and

Stephanie McCurry, Jiles explores the role of “public women” during the war and the way women’s new status as enemies reflected “what the war has done to this world” (pp. 40, 233). Unlike Faust, Jiles portrays most of her female characters as relatively distanced from ideological arguments; Adair hates the Union because it imprisoned her father and herself, and because Union-sympathizing militia terrorize her county, not because of ideology.[3]

Scholars may also find this book useful as an affirmation of the importance of material culture. Jiles’s eye for the role of fabric and clothing in her characters’ lives rivals historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s, and she adds to that a deep, affectionate interest in the surrounding natural world.[4] The strongest sections of the book, by far, are those where Adair works her hands over quilts and clothes or her feet over hill and stream. In those moments, Jiles’s background in poetry and her prodigious knowledge of the area are unimpeded by characterization and plot. There, readers have a sense of the mysteries of life during the Civil War.

In many ways—not least including its success—Jiles’s novel will be inevitably linked to Charles Frazier’s enormously popular *Cold Mountain*.^[5] The novel shares many of the strengths of Frazier’s work. Both are journeys by white-belt southerners caught in a war they neither understand nor particularly care about. Both are love stories. Both portray home fronts terrorized by Union-allied guerrillas. Both muster closely observed details to portray how life was lived during the war.

Any comparison with *Cold Mountain*, however, immediately reveals some of Jiles’s weaknesses as a writer. Where Frazier’s love story was subtle, hers is almost grotesquely obvious. Where Frazier luxuriates in moments of danger, Jiles speeds past them, anxious to reassure readers that Adair will be okay. These flaws dissipate the momentum that builds during the book’s strong sections. Few readers will feel suspense after Adair’s escape; few will feel emotionally invested in her too-easy love for Neumann; few will be entirely convinced by his flat, unambiguous character. Jiles’s work is, oddly, more at home in its history than in its fiction. It founders when it makes Adair Colley and William Neumann its central characters, instead of Michael Fellman or James McPherson. In this aspect the differences with *Cold Mountain* could not be more stark.

Jiles’s novel shares *Cold Mountain*’s less appealing features as well. Like Frazier, she virtually ignores the role of black people in shaping southern society and the

course of the war. Both novels seem to excuse this by placing their characters in lily-white mountain communities, but the exclusions seem particularly strange when Adair, like her *Cold Mountain* colleagues, travels through cities and past Union regiments, where she would surely encounter black women and men.

The attention both works have received (*Enemy Women* was widely reviewed and selected by *Good Morning America*’s Read This! book club) raises questions about the audience for these books. Why might works that excuse southern whites from their role in slavery and in the war become particularly popular now? Why would such works elide not only whites’ roles as slave owners but even the institution of slavery itself?

This cultural memory of the war as an injustice to white southerners is an old one, and one that is likely to become stronger once the movie version of *Cold Mountain* appears in theaters. While such a portrayal is perhaps an improvement over the *Gone with the Wind* images of the past, they give black southerners an even smaller role in the history of the conflict. It is not fair to ask any book, whether novel or historical monograph, to encapsulate the entirety of an era. It is, however, uncomfortable to see these two authors evade a question that would have been important to their characters, even given their mountain locations.

The reality of Adair Colley’s existence lies not solely in her relationship with the rivers and fabrics of her life or in her feeling of being “trapped by domesticity” (p. 14). The institution of slavery helped shape the experiences of southerners like Colley who did not own slaves by influencing power dynamics, economics, and codes of morality. Understanding the way such connections manifested themselves for mountain whites is important and difficult work. Jiles, like Frazier, essentially takes a pass, ignoring those questions in a way their characters could not. This is a disservice to readers and a disservice to the history that otherwise serves her well. If Jiles’s and Frazier’s portrayals continue to shape modern cultural memory, historians will have to spend a great deal of time describing what they left out.

The work also shares a flaw with Fellman’s *Inside War*. Both portray the cruelty of the Civil War as an historical novelty, a break from the past. This ignores the legacy of slavery, where personal cruelty was commonplace. What the war changed was not white Missourians’ capacity for inflicting pain, but the recipients of that pain. In the war, and in border wars with Kansans that preceded it, white Missourians practiced their old-fashioned

cruelty upon new subjects, other whites. Both writers underplay the role of slavery in shaping a society of casual violence.

Teachers will likely find this a useful book to assign to classes about the Civil War, in part because of its flaws. The book's occasional clumsiness may make it that much easier to engage in questions about what is left out.

Enemy Women raises significant questions about the role of women in the Civil War, about the nature of war, and about the encroachments of the federal government as the war closed. Jiles also, through her gracious attribution, raises interesting ideas about the relationship between novelists and historians, between fiction and history. It is a book that illustrates the ways novelists can benefit by engaging with academic history. For this reason, the book should stimulate discussions about the value of studying history, and about the relationship between history and other ways of telling stories about the past.

Notes

[1]. Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Viking Books, 1976.) Relatively recent nov-

els that make use of historical works but either leave them unnamed or noted briefly in acknowledgments include Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987); Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993); Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Scribner Paperback, 1990); and Russell Banks, *Cloudsplitter* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998).

[2]. Michael Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[3]. Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Stephanie McCurry, "The Brother's War': Women, Slaves and Popular Politics in the Civil War South," paper delivered at the Southern Association of Women Historians, Fort Worth, Tex., Nov. 1999.

[4]. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).

[5]. Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

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