

Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier

One problem with historical fiction is the inability of most authors to convincingly reorient our 21st century perceptions to their book's era. For example, we might wind up reading about 16th century French knights who think like us – their combination of barbarism and religiosity and sense of honor seeming like clear oil veneers through which we can see them move creakily, utterly unconvincing as rounded characters who belong to their age.

I find **Cold Mountain** convincing as a first-rate novel and as a representation of what it might have felt like to live in the American south in the 1860's.

As a novel, Frazier's use of the twin consciousnesses of Inman and Ada gives him an alternating structure of realities that appeals to us – their dawning awareness of their love for each other, Inman's recounting of battles and escapes, Inman's long journey back to his home ground, Ada's struggles to feed herself and to keep the farm and stay sane after Monroe's death – these move the reader forward in time and keep us anchored in sympathy for these individuals who do grow, who do evolve into dynamic characters.

Ruby is a triumph. She is so firmly grounded in the concrete reality of that time and place – supremely practical and competent in matters of farming and survival, possessed of a hard won dignity, as real as a rock. The minor characters of Teague and Storbrod and the preacher Veasey, the killer boy with the white hair and the blind boiled peanut vendor move in the book as one would expect in life. When we brush up against flesh and blood devils and the ner'do'wells and survivors, and they enter and leave our lives, they leave behind these vivid residues of memories, of the experience of having come into contact with a set of stories worth retelling.

His language is the wonderful machine by which Frazier transports us in into this time and place. Its **King James** Biblical rhythms, its use of archaic diction (that seems utterly natural), and the perfectly calibrated sound of that language in the mouths of his characters gives the "felt experience" we want in a novel, and thus it takes us by the heart. Is there anything more important in a novel than that encounter? Novels either captures us or we read them disinterestedly or we put them away.

Frazier's understanding of violence is acute. He knows that the battles of thousands are surreal and feel timeless and are filled with images so stark and acid-etched as if pulled out of a fever-dream or from a religious vision. He knows that gun fights, such as the one that ends the book, are amphetamine-fast; a decision and then gunfire, flailing, howling screams, threats, falling horses, the smooth movement of Inman in the midst of all of it, our consciousness melded with his.

Finally, Frazier tries to tell the truth about these human conditions as clearly and accurately and cleanly as one could do. The grace note that ends the book seems exactly right.