



The Fateful Lightning: A Novel of the Civil War

Jeff Shaara

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • From Jeff Shaara comes the riveting final installment in the Civil War series that began with *A Blaze of Glory* and continued in *A Chain of Thunder* and *The Smoke at Dawn*.

November 1864: As the Civil War rolls into its fourth bloody year, the tide has turned decidedly in favor of the Union. A grateful Abraham Lincoln responds to Ulysses S. Grant's successes by bringing the general east, promoting Grant to command the entire Union war effort, while William Tecumseh Sherman now directs the Federal forces that occupy all of Tennessee.

In a massive surge southward, Sherman conquers the city of Atlanta, sweeping aside the Confederate army under the inept leadership of General John Bell Hood. Pushing through northern Georgia, Sherman's legendary March to the Sea shoves away any Rebel presence, and by Christmas 1864 the city of Savannah falls into the hands of "Uncle Billy." Now there is but one direction for Sherman to go. In his way stands the last great hope for the Southern cause, General Joseph E. Johnston.

In the concluding novel of his epic Civil War tetralogy, Jeff Shaara tells the dramatic story of the final eight months of battle from multiple perspectives: the commanders in their tents making plans for total victory, as well as the ordinary foot soldiers and cavalymen who carried out their orders until the last alarum sounded. Through Sherman's eyes, we gain insight into the mind of the general who vowed to "make Georgia howl" until it surrendered. In Johnston, we see a man agonizing over the limits of his army's power, and accepting the burden of leading the last desperate effort to ensure the survival of the Confederacy.

The Civil War did not end quietly. It climaxed in a storm of fury that lay waste to everything in its path. *The Fateful Lightning* brings to life those final brutal, bloody months of fighting with you-are-there immediacy, grounded in the meticulous research that readers have come to expect from Jeff Shaara.

The Fateful Lightning: A Novel of the Civil War Details

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Author : Jeff Shaara

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From Reader Review *The Fateful Lightning: A Novel of the Civil War* for online ebook

Alexw says

While I find the narrative tedious at times but am sure if you are in the military the description of troop movements is interesting, the dialogue is what saved the book. Sherman's nervousness and Grants calm during the Civil War are emphasized.

The character of Franklin, the freed black was the centerpiece of the story and when he ends up as a librarian in New York City and makes his name, Abraham Lincoln Franklin, the book deserved the 4 stars.

happy says

Mr. Shaara uses his tried and true formula in this fourth and final volume of Civil War in the West Series and once again produces a superb look at the events of that War. Starting with burning of Atlanta, the author follows Sherman's army during the March to Sea and the subsequent march through South and then North Carolina to the end of the War.

Mr. Shaara uses Gen Sherman himself and a freed slave, Franklin, as the main narrators of the Union part of the story. The Southern story is told from the point of view of William Hardee the main Confederate Commander in Georgia and James Seely, a Captain in Wheeler's Cavalry.

I thought the portraits painted by Mr. Shaara of the four main characters are well done. On the Union side, the portrait Mr. Shaara paints of Gen Sherman is of a general sure of his convictions, but not quite sure of how they will be accepted by his superiors. He is also portrayed as having a much less harsh attitude towards Georgia and more significantly South Carolina than commonly accepted. His personal tragedies and the doubts they must have inspired are also well done.

Franklin, the freed slave, is probably my favorite character of the novel. He attaches himself to the Army after being liberated from the Governor of Georgia's plantation and the scenes of his education in the ways of the wider world are a delight to read. These include his first exposure to paper money, his taking under his wing a young girl who has also been freed and his becoming almost a mascot of one the Union regiments. While there are not very many battle scenes in the novel, his involvement in the Battle of Bentonville at the very end of the war, and the effects it has on him are well done.

For the Confederate story, William Hardee is portrayed as a consummate tactician, but frustrated by his mission and the lack of resources to accomplish it. He is tasked to defend Georgia, but is not given the troops to even attempt to fulfill his task. His frustration and disappointment with his superiors are well drawn.

The story of James Seely is probably the weakest of the four main characters. His story comes and goes through the novel and it remarkably one noted. A veteran of Forest's Cavalry, he is not impressed with Gen Wheeler and the actions that they take. Through Seely, the author looks at the extreme straights the Confederate Army was in at the time. Their horses are wearing down and can't be replaced, they don't have any reliable supplies, and the will to continue the fight is starting to wane.

As always, the novel is extremely well researched and I while the thoughts of the real life characters cannot

be known, they are definitely possible and agree with what is known. As always Mr. Shaara brings the Civil War to life and lets the reader gain an understanding of what it must have been like to serve, on either side, in the Civil War. I would rate this novel 4.25 stars if Goodreads allowed.

Tomlikeslife says

A good read. I wished he followed at least one more lower-ranking soldier and one less general. Too much talk and not enough action.

Donna Davis says

Those that love strong Civil War fiction have to get this book. It comes out in June, but thanks to the wonderful people at Net Galley and Random House/Ballantine Publishers, I was able to sneak a peek ahead of time. Although it is the fourth in a series, it also works really well as a stand-alone novel if you know the basic facts regarding Sherman's siege of Atlanta and its subsequent burning. As we join him and his hardened veterans fighting under Howard and Slocum, "the two fists that Sherman intended to drive through the heart of the deep South", they prepare to march to the sea.

Read more:

<http://seattlebookmamablog.org/2015/0...>

William says

A great summation to the last part of war presented from many sides. My summation on the war: it was all about "the damned cotton". Only slaves could work in those miserable conditions well enough to turn a profit. Read up on the history of Egypt where cotton came from.

The British, among others, bad mouthed the US for having slaves after it had outlawed it. Yet, they still bought the product even after an embargo. Also, the greatest customer for Southern cotton were the textile factories in the federal North who still obtained cotton during the conflict.

Well done J. Shaara

Suzanne says

The last novel in Shaara's four novel series on the Western Theater of the U.S. Civil War, started as a surprise. I thought for sure Shaara would open this novel with Sherman's taking, and subsequent burning of Atlanta. But that was not to be. Shaara felt that was not the story that needed to be told. Instead, he focused on what happened after Atlanta - General Sherman's march to the sea, and the ultimate end of the Civil War.

As usual with Shaara's novels, there is a lot of fascinating information packed into these pages. He presents General Sherman as pragmatic, but not barbarous. In spite of his army laying waste to the city of Atlanta, he shows how magnanimous Sherman was to the City of Savannah, and how the burning of Columbia could be laid at the feet of Wade Hampton's Confederate Calvary.

I enjoyed the perspective of some of the lesser officers, and also of a black aide de camp, Franklin, picked up along Sherman's march through Georgia. The fact that Shaara collects these stories through the memoirs and journals of these real life Civil War veterans, makes his books even more memorable. I like the fact that the stories of these men are now told, and made available to a wide audience.

Another wonderful novel from a master of wartime fiction.

James says

It is painfully apparent that the Civil War has become a politically incorrect subject to mainstream America as evidenced by the total lack of attention given the subject in this the 150th years era of the conflict. Contrast the amount of coverage given by media of all types to the same subject in the period 1961-65 to see what I mean.

In this period of relative inactivity up steps Jeff Shaara with 4 books on the war each published one year apart 2011-15. Rather than deal with the more well known portion of the war that took place in northern Virginia, Shaara has instead focused on the less well-known western theater of the war. His focus been the conflicts at Shiloh, Vicksburg, Chattanooga, and Sherman' march from Atlanta to Durham Station, NC. Fateful Lightning, this last book in the series, covers this march by Sherman.

These books are considered novels because the dialogue and thoughts written are purely from the authors imagination; a technique first introduced by the author's father, Michael Shaara, in his 1974 masterpiece Killer Angels. However, in every case I have checked, his adherence to historical fact with regard to dates, times, military strategies,etc. are all spot on.

For anyone with a love for history and a willingness to admit there was a conflict 150 years ago I strongly recommend Mr. Shaara's books

John Follos says

4/16

Randal White says

History At It's Best! Shaara continues his run of outstanding historical novels! The Fateful Lightning is about the ending days of the Civil War, seen through the lens of Sherman's "March To The Sea". As he has done before, Shaara once again lays his story out by telling it through the eyes of multiple characters. The main character, General Sherman; two Confederate soldiers; and, perhaps most interesting, a slave who was freed

by Sherman's army. As with all of his books, it is extremely well researched. It vividly describes the day to day struggles of the march as well as the battles along the way. And allows you insight into what may have been going through the character's minds at the time. I have studied a lot of Civil War history, but have to admit that I really never considered it through the eyes of a slave. But when you think about the situation they found themselves in, freed from their "owners" without any real knowledge of the world outside their plantation, it's amazing. Not to provide any spoilers, but I found several instances worth mentioning. On seeing money being exchanged for the first time, Franklin (the slave) states, "If we're being delivered, God won't be needing none of this. I ain't seen nothing in the Bible about tradin' paper to get into heaven". Also interesting was Franklin's amazement at something as simple as a letter, which he couldn't believe could be used to communicate over long distances. He was far from ignorant though, as when asked why the poor Southern white men would fight for the rich, he stated, "When the war broke out, the rich folk told the poor folk that if they win the war, they can have the land up north, and all the coloreds they want". Even though the book was very well written, and the plot moves along well, I found myself purposefully slowing down, in order to savor the book for as long as I could. I'm sorry that Shaara's series has come to a conclusion. I wish he could go on and on, but then, all good things must end eventually. Bravo, Mr. Shaara!

Jill says

This fictionalized account of the "March to the Sea" by General Sherman and its immediate aftermath near the end of the Civil War has good and bad points.

As with Shaara's other books in this series of novels on the Civil War, it's hard to go wrong with such great characters like Lincoln, Grant, and Sherman.

Sherman takes center stage in this book, with his march first to Savannah and then back north for an anticipated military rendezvous with Grant, a move which became unnecessary after the surrender by Lee to Grant at Appomattox. Historians have pointed to many factors contributing to Sherman's success, including the influence of his West Point training, his personal charisma, his intellectual energy, his past work experience which gave him intimate knowledge of the American terrain, an excellent command of logistics, and last but not least the brilliance of his strategic thinking. Shaara doesn't really acquaint us with much of this. Mostly, we encounter Sherman's thoughts about the weather, about his son, about his wife, about his respect for Grant, and his loathing of journalists and the fickle nature of politics. This is very much a book about quotidian thoughts people might have been having as they were slogging through the muck and mire to and from battles.

This quintessential example will give you an idea of (a) the content of much of the book; (b) the staccato and repetitive style of writing; and (c) why it is so very long. This scene occurs in Georgia, late at night when Sherman is once again having a sleepless night:

"He moved to the nearest fire, picked up a stick, prodded the faint embers. The ground around him was soggy from the rain, the fire nearly extinguished, but he poked harder, deeper, the embers growing brighter. He was determined now, searched the darkness for something to add to the flame, some kind of kindling, saw a stack of small sticks, covered by a canvas cloth. He pulled out a single stick, smelled it, the delicious scent of fat pine, used that to prod the embers until the heat ignited the stick. He let the flame crawl upward toward his hand, tilted it away, then added the fat pine to the glowing embers. He retrieved another . . ."

And on and on. . . .

Shaara chooses to tell this story by alternating among four main points of view: Union General Sherman, Confederate General William Hardee, Southern cavalryman Captain James Seely, and a young male slave from Georgia named Franklin. Franklin's story is perhaps the most interesting, and Shaara is to be commended for trying to show what that time period was like for the slaves who were able to abandon their plantations and attach themselves to Sherman's Army.

In his Afterword, Shaara tells what befell the main actors in the story after the end of the Civil War. He includes a paragraph about Franklin mixed in with the nonfictional characters, but without indicating that Franklin's "fate" is a product of his imagination.

Evaluation: It has to be said that with material like Sherman's March to the Sea, it's pretty hard not to make a pretty good story out of it. I would have liked to see some editing of the long interior monologues of some of the characters, and more attention paid to Sherman's strategical thinking, but it was still an enjoyable book.

Rating: 3.5/5

Linda Johnson says

I rec'd this book from Goodreads First Reads. Review to follow.

Ben says

Finally got around to reading this and I'm so glad I did as Jeff Shaara has delivered another great book. This completes his quadrilogy of books about the Civil War in the West. This finale focuses on Sherman's March to the Sea and through the Carolinas from November 1864 to April 1865. As usual Shaara makes history come to life through his well written characters, especially General Sherman and new character named Franklin, a former slave who follows Sherman's army and sees that both acceptance and hatred toward freed slaves in the Union Army. This was a fantastic book on an often misunderstood part of the Civil War which shows what is often considered a black and white subject in its more accurate shades of grey. Though I'm sad that Shaara will no longer be writing Civil War novels I look forward to his upcoming Korean War book.

Matt says

Shaara's history-rich tetralogy has finally come to an end with the most exciting novel saved for last. After taking the reader through numerous campaigns in the lesser-known Western Theatre of the American Civil War, Shaara has been able to bring closure to the bloody battles and military chess-play between leaders on both sides. In this novel, the focus shifts away from General Ulysses S. Grant, whose presence has been a key aspect of the previous novels. Instead, Grant has been called to Washington to help oversee the entire Union Army, leaving General William T. Sherman to take control of the Army in the West. Successful in Tennessee, Sherman looks to push further south and make his way down to Georgia, into the far reaches of the Deep South. While marching with his men, Sherman witnesses some of the plantations and settlements abandoned by landowners but still filled with those labelled as 'slaves'. Seeing some of the remnants of the

Confederate attempts to block the way, Sherman must make key decisions for those left behind to hide in their houses or cast a glance at barren fields. Have these people been forced to back the Secessionist Ways or will the Union soldiers be attacked when least they expect it? While Sherman has decided to take any foodstuffs left and torch all houses of Confederate supporters, his men go a little further, pillaging and raping the locals, particularly the recently released slave women. The mentality is that these people ought to be thankful for being freed and anything Unionists want, they ought to have. Shaara forces Sherman to face this, on occasion, though there is little glee in having to come to terms with these ideas and this offers a less than pristine view of the 'conquering saviours'. Shaara also introduces the reader to Franklin, a former slave who wishes to join the Union cause. A man with gumption and ideals, Franklin chooses to march with the men, though Sherman refuses to offer him the full rights of a Union soldier, at least for the time being. This is a true time of enlightenment, for Sherman and the entire Union cause. They have fought to free the slaves, left themselves bloodied on the battlefield to protect the views of Lincoln. However, when it comes time to offer equality or a parallel mindset, many are still stuck in the pre-War views, that these 'darkies' are surely not smart enough to engage with equally, let alone serve alongside other Union soldiers. On the other side of the fight, Generals William Hardee and Joseph Johnston offered up the best possible fight in a war that was slowly slipping away. Shaara insinuates that the Confederates had lost their trust in Braxton Bragg and sought a leader in the area who could repel Sherman and save what territory they called their own. Alas, Sherman's force and tactical abilities proved too much for Hardee in particular, though Johnston spurred his subordinate on with vigour and determination. The game of cat and mouse soon ended, with Grant squeezing out the final hoorah by forcing Robert E. Lee to lay down his arms in Virginia as Sherman marches through the Carolinas, en route to join with the rest of the Union forces. However, the story does not end there, even if Shaara does not pen its continuation. He insists that there is much yet to do, mending relationships and proverbial fences in a country that was not only lightly cicatrised by differing sentiments. Fundamental thought processes had to be shifted and those who were enemies had to either be accepted back into the fold or banished. President Johnson could not simply call for the incarceration of all Confederates, or accept their mass exodus from American soil. It is this unwritten next chapter (or volume) that will prove to be highly difficult for a country seeking to clean up its mess and return to the world scene. A wonderful final volume of the tetralogy that offers Shaara a chance not only to tie up some loose ends, but keep the reader pining for more.

That Jeff Shaara is a master storyteller is not a debate I wish to have here, as I have made my sentiments clear throughout these four novels. Nor am I willing to dispute that Shaara's historical fiction writing is superior to much that I have read to date. Shaara presents strong arguments that he admits to coaxing from historical texts, letters, and field journals, all of which breathe life into events that may not have made it into general history texts in secondary schools. While there is limited time to offer his arguments, Shaara does so effectively and from numerous vantage points. As I have said in earlier reviews, Shaara could just as easily allowed his stories to flow from an omnipresent narrator or from the points of view of those leading the charge, but he does not. Shaara seeks to offer both sides their chance to narrate key events, from generals down to civilians. The impact that this war had on the entire populace is not lost and the characters chosen to narrate offer a more thorough story than could be told otherwise. The attentive reader will see in this volume the banter between Franklin and the Union soldiers, the scolding they offer him for being a former slave, but it also rises up the ranks and the likes of General Sherman must come to terms with the underlying reasons for this war, outside of bringing in rebellious states back into the Union. These are powerful themes woven into the fabric of this story and must be said, lest they are forgotten and the reader brushes them aside. Additionally, while not as strongly presented in this volume, General Ulysses S. Grant had made numerous asides that some of the men on the other side of the battlefield were at one time brethren in other battles, particularly down in Mexico. It brings the 'brothers fighting brothers' phrase a new meaning and forces the reader to take a step back, realising how rooted this war was for America. Then again, as a Canadian, I should likely not spout off too much about its importance and stick to my own literary commentary.

Kudos, Mr. Shaara for finishing the tetralogy on such a resounding note. I am eager to dive into your account of the Korean War, surely filled with new and slightly more modern characters who will still keep the reader enthralled throughout that conflict.

Like/hate the review? An ever-growing collection of others appears at:
<http://pecheyponderings.wordpress.com/>

victor harris says

I thought Shaara slumped in some of his recent works but he regained his good form with this. The character dialogue was excellent and had its share of amusing quips, particularly from General Sherman. He certainly brought home the frustration of both sides: the Union hampered by the weather and terrain; the Confederates, by being vastly outmanned and beset by petty command rivalries. It does focus more on the overall campaign with strategy and tactics filling the lion-share of the narrative while the battle scenes were judiciously inserted and captured the horror of the conflict.

I do have several minor criticisms. I didn't think the role of Franklin the liberated slave was efficiently woven into the account. I understand what Shaara was doing by including the sections on liberated slaves and how they could be both a burden and an asset, but the character selected just didn't have an authentic ring. There was also the repeated mention that this one or that one "saluted." That became annoying, one assumes they saluted, and if not and there was a point to it, then it would be worth mentioning. All that considered, this qualifies as a high 4 and close to a 5 rating.

Phil says

I was looking for a biography of Sherman when I came across this book. I had never read any of Shaara's novels but saw they were highly praised so I decided to give it a try. Am I ever glad I did so.

You are put in the minds of Sherman, a confederate general, a confederate cavalryman and a young freed slave. Alternate chapters are from the viewpoint of each of the above. This literary method works extremely well in telling the story of Sherman's March to the Sea.

The history is religiously followed. Sherman's ability to continually fool the Confederates as to what his intentions were is accurately pictured as a result of Sherman's personality: taciturn and sole proprietor of his plans. He shared them with no one. Even the President had to admit, "We know what hole he went in, but we don't know what hole he'll come out of."

Some found his methods of burning and scavenging brutal. He instead found it to be the most efficient way of bringing the war to an end.

For the south the military knew the war was lost and all they could do was to try and slow Sherman's relentless drive forward as the Confederate politicians issued worthless platitude after platitude. One of the surprising elements to the story was how badly the people of the south hated their own army which stripped the land owners of everything they needed to survive.

As Sherman went from one victory to the next (often not opposed) freed slaves by the thousands began

following his army so now not only did he have to feed his soldiers but also the vast number of destitute blacks who had no where else to go and feed them he did.

At the end of the war a great parade was held in Washington. The first on parade was the Army of the Potomac that protected the capital. The soldiers were dressed out in their finest attire, everyone looking polished and well fed. Following them came Sherman's army still wearing their tattered and torn uniforms, men that had obviously gone through much with little to sustain them in enemy territory. As moving as the sight was to the spectators what really moved the crowd to tears and then cheers were the thousands of slaves walking behind the army as they had done for hundreds of miles. If there ever was a reason to celebrate the victory, this was it!

The battles depicted are vivid, the despair of the Confederate army poignant and the behind the scenes actions by Sherman's detractors shown for what they were.

But in the end it was Sherman himself that summed up the experience in his own taciturn and cryptic way.

"I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot nor heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded who cry aloud for blood, for vengeance, for desolation. War is hell."

Cindy says

Entertainingly informative & enjoyable for history buffs & normal people :-) No mystery to outcome, however, drawing from truthful resources the author gives insight into the character of men (of higher & lower ranks on both sides) involved in the Civil War. Pleasantly, clearly, & gently narrated by Paul Michael (for whole series & his usual - KUDOS!)

Luke Paulsen says

I swear, at some point Jeff Shaara was a really good writer. The book that started it all, his father's *The Killer Angels*, is the true classic, but the younger Shaara's additions to the Civil War trilogy were solid, and his follow-up works-- *Gone For Soldiers* and *Rise to Rebellion* in particular-- were actually great fun. But then he got bogged down in his books on the World Wars, and tried to go back to his roots with this series of four books describing the Western theater of the Civil War... anyway, long story short, it isn't working out. *The Fateful Lightning* is the last of those four books, and the quality has gone far enough downhill that at times it almost feels like self-parody.

Which is a shame, because these are stories worth telling. The idea of setting up several firsthand perspectives of the choices and experiences of war is a great one, and there's tons of history that deserves this treatment-- even though Sherman's 1864-1865 campaigns, which were heavy on the marching and light on the fighting, are a somewhat odd choice. Shaara also introduces a freed slave as one of his major narrators, a bold choice and a good one despite the flawed execution.

But, yeah, about that execution. The plotting is flat and lifeless. The prose is stiff and over-explanatory. The characters aren't developed nearly enough. And neither the action nor the themes are sufficient to inject any

noticeable spark of life. The book is just as much a long slog as the campaign that it's about, with no real purpose or payoff at the end except the satisfaction of getting through it. Shaara fans should heed my warning, face up to the fact that the writing is getting worse, and start looking for a stopping point in their reading. Non-fans should definitely check out the other books I mentioned above-- but give this one a pass.

Brian says

This novel is the closing book in the quartet that Mr. Shaara wrote about the largely ignored (at least in historical fiction) western theater of the American Civil War. I believe that the series is worth your time to read if you have a preexisting interest in the subject.

“The Fateful Lightning” is really General Sherman’s book. It begins with his leaving Atlanta after its capture and concludes with the surrender of Joe Johnston’s army in late April of 1865. Per his usual style, the book is written in alternating viewpoints from a few character’s point of view. Each chapter is a first person account from its narrator. Other than William T. Sherman, no other character really registers consistently in the novel. I think that General Sherman is one of the better characters (in terms of how he is written) that Mr. Shaara has created so I did not mind this.

A quibble with the text, Mr. Shaara clearly cannot write woman characters. When they show up and speak it is not very authentic or interesting. Oddly enough, the second book in this series did have a compelling female character as one of its alternating narrators. Not sure what happened here?

There are also a few moments where slavery appears to be whitewashed, but stick with it. The evil of slavery is not whitewashed at all; Mr. Shaara is just presenting it in its historical context without judging. I appreciated that approach. It speaks for itself, and the author does not (and did not) have to condemn it in modern terms. As the novel progresses, it clearly condemns itself.

The book bears out the enormity of the Civil War with an unexpected subtlety in its final chapters that is quite good. It is appropriate and well done.

Overall, the novels in this series are not great. They are good, at times very good, and I read them all quickly. I am glad that I did.

Rob says

The first three books of Shaara’s western Civil War series were weak, but “Faithful Lightning” finishes this tetralogy with a bang. It’s a great read, portraying both sides fairly as Sherman marches from Atlanta “to the sea,” then heads northward through the Carolinas as the war comes to an end. If you’re a Shaara fan, you’ll be satisfied, knowing that he’s back on his game. For others, it’s a stand-alone book, well worth your interest if the Civil War intrigues you.

David Eppenstein says

I have read and enjoyed all of Jeff Shaara's books including this one. However, at just over 600 pages it is by far one of his longest and I'm not sure why. It covers Sherman's March to the Sea which would seem to merit such length. The problem for me is that the book opens as Sherman is leaving the defeated City of Atlanta. Nothing, not one page devoted to the siege that begins this epic march. Why? The last book was entirely devoted to the battle for Chattanooga. Atlanta didn't deserve something more than a mere mention? After Atlanta there was very little combat above the level of skirmishes. Sherman was virtually unopposed for

most of his march. That being the case we have 600 pages describing weather, marching conditions, bummer exploits, freed slave concerns etc. All of this was, as usual, well researched and historically accurate but did it require a book of this length? I love history so the length was only a minor irritant but a less devote reader may find the length tedious and off putting. Tighter editing might have made for a more fascinating read.
