

A Historical Novel About the Apache Wars

BLOOD BROTHER.

By Elliott Arnold. . . . 558
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Reviewed by
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THE American reading public receives novels about American Indians with a great lack of enthusiasm, and for good reason. For the most part they are the most narrowly regional of all our regional writings, depending in the last analysis upon the exotic qualities of their subjects for interest. From Fenimore Cooper to now no first-rate novelist has written a major work centering on Indians. A few have dealt with them incidentally or secondarily, such as Hemingway. When he does so, as in his remarkable, delicate "Fathers and Sons," he writes of people. The fact that they are Ojibwas is incidental, which is what we should expect of a truly first-rate writer.

The two best Indian novels so far are Fast's "The Last Frontier" and MacNichol's "Crazy Weather." Both cause the reader to see the Indians through the eyes of white men; in both, white men, or a white boy, are central to the story, although it is the Indians who make it. These two writers have effectively made their Indians into human beings through giving us a perception of them which is human and understandable. The rest of us have tried to turn ourselves into Indians and write from inside something which we have never been inside of. Without exception we have become entangled in the ethnology. We have written about differences, not likenesses. The resulting books have, in some cases, had popular success, but they have been inevitably special instead of universal. The writer who most nearly overcame this difficulty is the late Will Livingston Comfort in his curious, powerful, awkwardly written "Apache." Mathews's "Wah'kon-Tah" is a special case; it is not truly fiction, and the author is part Osage and was reared among the people of whom he wrote.

The American Indian, taken unsentimentally and realistically, offers wonderful material. Because the possibilities are so great, one longs to see them competently exploited.

Mr. Arnold has balanced a white man against his Indian and written about them in relation to each other, and he has chosen the richest, juiciest subject of them all—the war of the white men against Cochise and his Apaches. This is a subject crying for treatment. It abounds in remarkable characters. The course of events serves as a strange, clear mirror held up before white Americans. The subject has drama to burn. The only reservation one can have about the choice is to wonder why it should be treated as a novel. As a straight history, written by the right man, it ought to win critics and earn royalties.

It is virtually impossible for a competent writer to be dull on this subject. Mr. Arnold is dull only when he wanders from it, especially in his two improbable and unnecessary love stories. His two principal women behave in a most unlikely way, and while he dallies with them (one feels that it is the writer, rather than the hero, who is dallying) the story stops in its tracks. Incidental love

interest should be kept incidental.

Apart from the women, this book is good reading. It drags occasionally, when the ethnology gets the author down and he describes too much. In general, however, long as it is, the story holds a fast pace, and the events could not fail to hold a reader's interest. Mr. Arnold has succeeded, also, in making credible two virtually incredible, but real characters, Cochise and the scout, Jeffords. His picture of the Apache chief's tormented mind is outstanding.

Most readers, feeling as they do about Indian books, may be inclined to turn away from this one when they enter the first chapter, which is solid Indian and much too detailed. I assure any one who likes an exciting story, full of hair-

breadth escapes and daring, a story which is also a notable analysis of the various behaviors of Americans under pressure of fear and prejudice, that it is well worth while to read on. This is not just an Indian novel; it is a historical novel, properly speaking, and one which touches upon some deep elements in the American character.

Mr. Arnold has made an attempt to add timeliness to his book by having certain of his characters make prophetic references obviously intended to point up parallels, some of which do not exist between the situation they are facing and our present world position. These attempts are too few to annoy, and may be ignored.

The great history of the Apache wars remain to be written. The novel about Indians which we shall accept and keep, book and characters, as we have "Lord Jim" or even "The Good Earth," has yet to come. Meantime, before us is a book which will give any reader a couple of delightful evenings.



Elliott Arnold

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