

AILA'S JOURNAL (A TALE OF SOUTHERN RECONSTRUCTION)

By Charles M. Clemmons

IndieReader Rating: 4.8

Thoughtfully crafted and genuinely heartrending, Charles M. Clemmons's AILA'S JOURNAL (A Tale of Southern Reconstruction) is a powerful exploration of race, identity, and human connection that is both painful and inspiring to read.

The story depicts the harrowing yet transformative journey of a white indentured servant and an enslaved Black woman, whose friendship defies societal norms as they navigate the traumas of the Civil War and Reconstruction—finding strength and purpose in their enduring bond.

Slavery and its aftermath have left indelible stains on the fabric of American history, and literature on the subject often struggles to navigate the gap between historical accuracy and the emotional nuance needed to do justice to the complexities of the human condition under such an oppressive system. AILA'S JOURNAL (A Tale of Southern Reconstruction), a historical novel by Charles M. Clemmons, is an earnest attempt to give voice to the voiceless and to examine the past as empathetic participants in a tale of survival, dignity, and the enduring power of friendship. For the author, AILA'S JOURNAL is a work of introspection, the primary purpose of which is to encourage examination of history's relevance to our values today. As such, publication and sale will be on a not-for-profit basis.

AILA'S JOURNAL tells the story of two women in the tumultuous period of post-Civil War America: Aila MacKenzie, a white indentured servant, and Mary Jane Sanders, an enslaved Black person. The two meet at the tender age of thirteen on a small farm near Wilmington, North Carolina, in the waning days of the Civil War. United by trauma and hardship, Aila and Mary Jane form an enduring friendship that withstands the difficulties of war, the struggles of Reconstruction, and the onset of the Jim Crow era. Aila, headstrong and independent-minded, maintains her moral center in the face of widespread social and racial injustice, while Mary Jane's resilience and indomitable spirit allow her to survive the indignities inflicted upon her by a shattered South.

Clemmons draws not only from meticulous historical research but also from a life steeped in the soil where the events of his novel occurred. Having grown up working on his father's farm in rural North Carolina, Clemmons brings to his work a deep familiarity with the landscapes and dialects of the novel's setting.

AILA'S JOURNAL plunges the reader into the landscape of the American South, with richly evocative descriptions (including "the sweltering heat and humidity sweat-soaked her shirt" and the "setting sun on the horizon through the bramble and majestic outstretched arms of live oaks") that paint a vivid tableau. Clemmons's use of dialect (including the line, "Looks like God jes' put 'em thur an' shined his light on 'em jes' fur me! God does make a purdy world") can come across as heavy-handed at times, veering close to caricature and stereotype. While the dialect may be true to the period and characters, it can be distracting—and might have been more

effective if it were less overt, allowing the imagery and action to speak more for themselves. Still, the use of vernacular lends the narrative authenticity and emotional depth.

As a novel penned by a white, male, Southern author, AILA'S JOURNAL occupies a contentious space. Measured against literary works on the same subject by Black authors, such as Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* or Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, the value of Clemmons's novel could be seen as ambiguous. AILA'S JOURNAL can't help but tread awkwardly where it lacks authentic experience—and risks muting or distorting voices that should be at the center of this narrative.

Fortunately, Clemmons handles his volatile subject matter with utmost care, respect, and willingness to listen to (and amplify) marginalized voices. It's a story steeped in profound empathy, understanding, and the desire for unity, but it doesn't shy away from depicting the brutality and humiliation suffered by its less-privileged characters. And Clemmons achieves the tricky feat of educating without preaching, layering his writing with historical facts that would please any history buff without sacrificing the novel's pacing or rich characterizations. It's a strong debut novel by an undeniably talented author, and—given its open ending—one likely to leave readers yearning for a follow-up.

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~Edward Sung for IndieReader