

Big Love and War Horse

Shallen Anne Chitwood

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A family in mourning bands together through their hardships, nurturing hopes for their future, in the heartfelt novel Big Love and War Horse.

In Shallen Anne Chitwood's historical novel *Big Love and War Horse*, a rural family emerges from their grief at a gradual rate, supported by their canine companions.

The novel is set in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. After the death of Jonas and Kay's mother, Joy, their alcoholic father, Luke, leaves them to tend to their dwindling farm alone, forcing them to become self-sufficient. They are determined in their efforts. Kay tries to cook, but struggles; Jonas sometimes escapes into the surrounding woods. Jonas also proves to be a thoughtful brother, though; he shields Kay from harsh details, as well as from his feelings of shame and anger. The teenagers also benefit from the company of Big Love and War Horse, a Great Pyrenees and a Doberman, as they struggle to survive.

The dogs, who are loyal to the teenagers throughout, share narrative duties with the family. They are protective and observant, revealing facets of who the humans around them are. Luke, for example, has a past spotted by wartime absence; he worked on merchant marine ships. On occasion, though, the dogs' points of view strain credulity by sounding too human; they perceive more about their surroundings than could be expected. They judge people's behavior, reflect, draw conclusions, and voice their internal thoughts. They also often sound more juvenile than Jonas and Kay do, calling the book's ideal audience into question.

Much of the family's history, including the hidden violence in Joy's life, is dispensed via memories. However, these overwhelm the book's present at times and slow its progression. Further, Luke's eventual transformation is underexplained; he expresses a desire to become a better father to Jonas, but the impetus for this change is vague. The arrival of Luke's sister, Linnie, is better supported. Her exterior sternness is sometimes misunderstood; her desire to be around family is heartening. However, the book's detours to cover her previous romantic interests are jarring, as are her fears based on a misogynistic presence from her past.

The book's cohesion is further compromised by the introduction of a crime that shifts focus away from the family's problems. The story works toward a dramatic confrontation and tidy character summaries, but its unevenness here and throughout impedes final satisfaction.

In the historical novel *Big Love and War Horse*, a mourning family's love endures despite the brutal secrets in their pasts.

KAREN RIGBY (August 7, 2024)

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