

Bone Necklace

Julia Sullivan

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Bone Necklace is a captivating historical novel in which men are troubled by their wartime losses.

Julia Sullivan's piercing historical novel *Bone Necklace* revisits the 1877 Nez Perce War through the personal stories of people on its opposing sides.

When Jack's mother goes missing after their Idaho home is burned, he volunteers with the militia in the hopes of finding her. He endures a ruthless battlefield ambush while also contending with alcoholism, a broken heart, and his contentious relationship with his father. Jack's guilt about his army role further compounds his unease.

Elsewhere, Running Bird, a seventeen-year-old Nez Perce warrior, bristles when he's ordered onto a reservation. His grievances toward white people prompt him to seek retribution, but this pains his conscience too. Further tragedies involving his Nez Perce band fuel his sense of resolve, though. And the book's third part introduces an artist at Yellowstone. Despite her late addition, her perspective is rich and conflicted: the Nez Perce people caused her pain, yet they are also the reason for her survival.

As the novel progresses, the men confront the fallout of their decisions, including uncomfortable questions about both complicity and duty. Jack struggles after following orders from General Sherman that led to the deaths of Nez Perce women and children; his moral boundaries erode, even as he fights to maintain his sensitivity. Running Bird, meanwhile, has become numb to violence, though he also realizes that his life story hasn't unfolded as it could have. With little room for moral high ground, the men's characterizations are dimensional. Their stories connect through acts against each other's families that propel queries about what's just. Their careful reflections keep the novel from becoming too bleak; they each unearth empathy toward the other. Despite the senseless nature of war, this leads to a sense of hope.

Visceral scenes convey both a sense of the rugged outdoors and of the physicality of war. Action scenes are interspersed with newspaper excerpts that reveal shifts in white people's perceptions of Native Americans: there are instances of racism toward the Nez Perce people, but also of respect toward Chief Joseph as he guides his people to Montana and surrenders with dignity. Later admissions that the war was unnecessary mix with broad, prejudice-tinged generalizations and tense correspondence between generals—a crisp overview of period perspectives.

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KAREN RIGBY (October 11, 2022)

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