

Rain Upon the Blinding Dust

Jim Hawley

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Set during the Civil War, *Rain Upon the Blinding Dust* tells the story of Moses, a runaway slave who joins the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry, and John, a drummer in the 33rd Iowa Infantry. Moses and John meet at the failed Red River Campaign, which was fought in 1864 in Louisiana.

Each chapter begins with a date and a well-chosen quote (many from the Bible). A few hand-drawn maps also give readers a sense of where the action is taking place.

Jim Hawley was raised near a fort where some of the book's action takes place and his father told him the story of John. However, even while Hawley's interpretation of his father's story has great elements, there are problems in the execution of his book.

Rain Upon the Blinding Dust begins with a pointed illustration of the cruelties of slavery. Moses, a young slave, finds that doing as he is told is not enough to avoid being harassed by his master's son, Raymond. There is nothing wrong with using this conflict as an opening, but the author leaves little time for readers to become engaged with the characters before they learn that Moses and his family have escaped to freedom in the Kansas Territory. The story moves quickly and, as a result, character development is lacking. When the author returns to Moses' story in the middle of the book, readers learn that Moses snuck away from home to join the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers. Although one can imagine why a character in Moses' position would join, it is not clear why he had to sneak away to do so.

After introducing Moses, the writer inexplicably changes course to follow Moses' master, Jesse, as he joins the army. Raymond factors into the story later, but it is unclear why the writer devotes time to Jesse because this detour leads readers away from Moses and John.

Later, when the story returns to Moses, the author pays too much attention to Moses' fellow soldiers. While these characters add flavor to the story, they distract from what might have been a more powerful account of how two young men, from different backgrounds, meet during war and affect each other.

Overall, the story suffers from a disjointed narrative. The author's knowledge of the Kansas Territory and the Red River Campaign is worthy of note. He also does a good job describing the conditions soldiers had to endure during the Civil War.

JADA BRADLEY (August 17, 2012)

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