



## Tidewater

**Eric B. Miller**

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*A longtime couple anchors their small community through a period of substantial change in the epic historical novel Tidewater.*

Eric B. Miller's absorbing, character-driven historical novel *Tidewater* traces domestic and intimate relationships in a memorable American family.

*Tidewater*, a Maryland estate and dairy farm located in a rural enclave, is helmed by benevolent Captain Croft and his wife Alice, whose relationship is warm and respectful. The families who work for them include a Black couple who remember the cruel previous estate owner and an impoverished mountain family stricken by the loss of their sons in World War I. Among this group, intrigue ignites when the farm's boss notices that Captain Croft's torso is scarred, hinting that he led a different kind of life prior to landing among the gentry. Indeed, he is revealed to have been a mercenary before meeting Alice, a Gilded Age heiress.

In this sprawling novel, extensive time is devoted to revealing people's ties to each other. The book shifts between the perspectives of the extensive cast, which includes the Crofts' wandering sons Autie, who is suspected of wartime cowardice, and Rory, a handsome, dangerous, and selfish ne'er-do-well who is sent overseas by his father; peeks into their childhood are used to excuse away some of their adulthood traits, if in a somewhat unconvincing manner. Knowledge of who people truly are is juxtaposed to who they present as, giving depth to the book's interpersonal misunderstandings: Autie's Belgian wife, for instance, keeps a traumatic secret that leads to an emotional gulf between them. Meanwhile, Laura, a Swedish American who once loved both boys, possesses often underappreciated strengths and leaves indelible impressions on people.

However, the intervals between the perspective shifts are often too lengthy, and individual stories lag. For example, allusions are made to Captain Croft and Alice's wild meet-cute, but the story of it—which is packed with slain missionaries and a river escape in China—is quite delayed. Indeed, the book winds and wends through various people's searches for fulfillment. Those who do mature do so against the backdrop of the fin de siècle and World War I, variously resisting and embracing change as they are pulled between expectations and opportunities.

The prose lingers over sensory details about life on the Croft farm, which is marked by subtle opulence, including a gravel driveway and a Delft-tiled fireplace. Some of its period details are superficial, as with transitions away from wearing corsets. Some, though, have weighty implications, as with concerns surrounding inheritance. Instances of gratuitous sexuality compromise the consistency of the book's tone, though, and the book's ending is abrupt.

*Tidewater* is an epic historical novel in which a brave couple guides their descendants through heartbreaks and rising fortunes.

KAREN RIGBY (August 2, 2024)

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