

# KIRKUS REVIEWS

HARPER'S SHILOH

Sean Kevin Gabhann

Natchez Trail Press (383 pp.)

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## BOOK REVIEW

Lt. James Harper and his men are thrown into one of the bloodiest battles in the American Civil War in this, the final volume in Gabhann's trilogy of historical novels.

Lt. Harper has finally rejoined his First Iowa Volunteers, along with Corp. Gustav Magnusson and nurse (and erstwhile prostitute) Katie Malloy. His new assignment—assistant quartermaster—is once again unbecoming to the highly experienced former deputy federal marshal, prison escapee, and spy for Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. It's campaign season, and the Union Army has pushed deep into Tennessee. After a surprise promotion to captain—which seems to displease most of the men in his battalion—Harper is placed in an administrative position that he hopes, as ever, to parlay into a battle command. Luckily for him, the proximity of the enemy means he doesn't have to wait long. Magnusson is in a wheelchair after injuries he sustained helping Katie flee her brothel, which prevents him from riding with his skirmishers. He's beginning to wonder whether rescuing Katie was worth all the trouble. Katie is glad to be free but still terrified of reprisal from her old colleagues. As Harper and Magnusson chafe against their new roles, the inevitable conflict with the nearby Rebel soldiers—who have already drawn Union blood—looms on the horizon, threatening to shatter whatever temporary safety they have found. Gabhann writes with his typical blend of blood, grit, and wry humor: "Silence filled the tent punctuated by the rumble of the distant canons. It was times like these that war seemed surreal to Harper—how the movements and assaults of thousands of men could be understood and planned by three men hunched over a map." The author writes well about battle, and the novel plays to that strength. Furthermore, the final storylines for Harper and his companions provide the necessary emotional context for the conflict, as well as supplying satisfying conclusions to their character arcs. While the pacing occasionally bogs down, particularly in the book's first half, this is the strongest novel in the trilogy.

An appropriate and high-stakes conclusion to a Civil War saga.

# PW/Booklife Review

Gabhann rounds out his Shiloh Trilogy with this action-packed entry (after Harper's Rescue) that follows Lieutenant James Harper on his return to the First Iowa Volunteer Infantry. Harper —along with the loyal Corporal Gustav Magnusson and Katie Malloy, a recently rescued saloon-girl disguised as an army nurse—may have returned to his battalion, but his new job as Assistant Quartermaster is basically busywork, and it's keeping him from the heat of battle at a crucial moment in history. Desperate to get back into action, Harper is shocked when his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Monroe, suddenly promotes him to Captain—opening the door for Harper to get his coveted command.

Harper is once again the daring, brash officer fans have come to love in this final installment. Between his efforts to join the fighting, and his compulsion to protect Katie from the harsh reality of camp life, he's every bit the heroic Union soldier. Meanwhile, Magnusson is fighting his own demons, torn between his attraction to Katie and his fears that a former prostitute may not fit into his family's staunch Quaker beliefs, and the physical injuries he received after rescuing Katie from her past life are interfering with his military aspirations. Gabhann skillfully dramatizes the interpersonal conflicts of his main players, adding a depth to the story that makes this more than just bloody, convincing battle setpieces, and the supporting characters are rich in their own right—particularly Sarah Featherstone, a First Iowa sergeant's wife, who shows as much spirit as her battle-hardened husband.

Though the ending may feel somewhat neat given the complexities of the characters—and the war and its aftermath—Gabhann gives readers satisfying closure while honoring the brutality of the war itself. They don't write them like this anymore: sweeping, dramatic, alive with blood and soil, balancing what it would have felt like to be there with the urgent question of what it all meant.

**Takeaway:** A Civil War captain faces his ultimate test in this battle-hungry novel.

**Great for fans of:** E.L. Doctorow's *The March*, Bernard Cornwell's *Battle Flag*.

## **Production grades**

Cover: **A**

Design and typography: **A**

Illustrations: **N/A**

Editing: **A-**

Marketing copy: **A**