



The Hidden Light of Northern Fires

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A novel rooted in the remarkable, but little-known, true history of the only secessionist town north of the Mason Dixon Line.

When escaped slave, Joe Bell, collapses in her father's barn, Mary Willis must ward off Confederate guerillas and spies, Joe's vengeful owner, and even her own brother to help the handsome fugitive cross to freedom.

Mary has always been an outcast, an outspoken abolitionist woman in a town of bounty hunters and anti-Union farmers. Helping runaways is the only thing that makes her life in Town Line bearable. As the countryside is riled by the drumbeat of civil war and the promise of an extravagant bounty for the wounded fugitive, Mary finds herself drawn to the stranger in forbidden ways. When rebels cross from nearby Canada intent on killing him, they bring the devastation of the brutal war to the town and the farm, and threaten to destroy all that Mary loves.

The Hidden Light of Northern Fires Details

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Author : Daren Wang

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From Reader Review The Hidden Light of Northern Fires for online ebook

Angela M says

I love learning the seed of a story, the spark, the idea, the one thing that moves an author to write a story. Sometimes I come across this in an author interview but I like it best when it is told upfront at the beginning of the book, as it was in this case. That the author lived in the house where Mary Willis lived and that he felt he had to tell her story really drew me in . Even though, this is a fictionalized interpretation, I really appreciate that it is based on a real woman, a fervent abolitionist who lived in a house in a place called Town Line, NY. That this place is less than an hour and a half from where I live but who knew that a place this far north would actually secede from the United States? (<https://search.proquest.com/openview/...>)

All of that aside, it's a work of fiction but it conveys the events and the atmosphere of the time in history just before and during the Civil War. Runaway slaves, slave hunters and the brave people who made up the Underground Railroad are at the center of this story. Mary Willis, strong willed, intelligent is not going to settle for being a someone's wife with no life of her own. Returning home after college, she's restless, searching for that something that will give meaning to her life. A sincere desire to do something important leads her to the Abolitionist movement, and she becomes an important link in the Underground Railroad moving runaways into Canada. She couldn't have known that crossing paths with Joe Bell, a runaway slave would change her life in ways she never imagined. It also about family, about relationships of fathers and sons and daughters, even the illegitimate ones. It's certainly about racism and the blight on this country, the history of slavery. A cast of characters both good and evil, a page turning plot - a great debut effort. Overall 3.5 rounded up to 4 stars .

I received an advanced copy of this book from St. Martin's Press through NetGalley.

Kasa Cotugno says

Amazing that this is a debut novel, but then Daren Wang, the author, has been around books and authors his entire life, chairing a prestigious writer's festival in Decatur Georgia, so he is no dilettante when it comes to the craft. Add to that a personal connection to his material. When as a boy he moved with his family to a town near Buffalo, New York, and became fascinated with the contents of the barn that became their home. Most notably, books, and a handwritten journal "in a lady's hand." After researching its history, he found that the town itself had seceded with the South during the Civil War, and the house, the home of an abolitionist, part of the underground railway. This beautiful, immersive novel is the result of that research and inquiry.

Jenny GB says

I received a free copy of this book from Goodreads Giveaways. Thank you!

Wang's novel tells the fictionalized story of a town near the U.S./Canada border in New York that actually succeeded from the Union and didn't officially rejoin the U.S. until 1946. Most of the story is told from the

point of view of Mary, the daughter of a wealthy farmer who helped found the town. Mary has been educated and strongly supports the abolitionist cause, which is an unpopular stance in her hometown. Mary involves herself in the underground railroad, which puts everyone she knows and loves in danger. In the broader story, we also follow Mary's brother, Leander, Harry the orphan boy Mary's father cared for, and Yates the son of a plantation owner.

I enjoyed the story and I read it quickly, but it's not without faults. Some other readers have pointed out glaring historical inaccuracies. I noticed many typos throughout the advance copy that will hopefully be found and fixed. Many of the characters are typical archetypes such as the stern and demanding father (two of those), the good for nothing son (two of those), and the evil conniving spy working behind the scenes. I loved Mary, but even she strains credulity in terms of her bravery and how unafraid she is of what anyone thinks of her actions and ideas. I did like that there was a true feeling of jeopardy throughout the book and none of the characters were safe, but the body count in this book tough. It makes for a good, quick read that tells a sweeping story of the civil war, but for me it stopped short of being great.

Chaya Nebel says

This is a fairly readable personal historical story that starts on the cusp of the Civil War, in a small New York town with homes that served as stops on the Underground Railroad, and whose various characters illustrate the complexity and confusion about the issue of slavery and more broadly the situations and questions of the black citizens of the US at this time.

The protagonist of the story, Mary, is the main catalyst here in the tale of a runaway slave, Joe Bell, whom she takes care of and grows to love, but there are several other characters, each with his or her own story: her wastrel brother, their gruff but loving father, the neer-do-wells in town, the evil slaveowner's son searching for his runaway slave, etc, etc. They each get a little piece of the story here, and that makes for varied and interesting reading. In addition, these various characters and their relationships to each other provide a lot of the story's tension and suspense, as there are a variety of differing attitudes toward the president, slavery and abolition, and the looming war. The characters for the most part are individualized and varied. Surprisingly, I found Joe, the runaway slave, the least fleshed-out character, with very little actual personality of his own.

The book is fairly well researched, a glaring necessity in historical fiction, and a particular challenge in a book of this scope and reach and cast of characters. However, there are a few storytelling glitches that get in the way, especially early on, that are fairly distracting. For example, the character of Katia is presented in one scene, but not introduced and her relationship explained until a few scenes later. A particular scene begins at nightfall, and then a few minutes and a few pages later it's suddenly morning. Time passage is again weird in a larger way, regarding the Harper's Ferry incident. The runaway's recovery is about a year after that incident, but the next scene starts with a character reflecting on two years passing since Harper's Ferry. There are a couple of anachronisms, as well, such as in the scene of the local boys and girls gathering together to drink and dance and fiddle. Single girls of decent parentage at this time would not go unchaperoned to a barn gathering to mingle with men and drink booze. Then there's the oversexed widow of means and society who holds Leander hostage as her personal sex slave for a week. Uh, no.

I hope the many typos will be seen to in the final published edition.

Overall an interesting read.

Thank you to the author and publishers for a review copy.

Karen says

An excellent debut of historical fiction. Told from multiple perspectives, the story seemed authentic; I could feel the tension of time and place. Whenever runaway slave Joe Bell and activist Mary Willis were actively in the story, I was especially captivated. They were brave, loyal, smart and likable. I was also impressed by the depiction of other characters as well, even the unlikeable ones like Yates and Leander, their human flaws and transformations well-done. A thought-challenging and sobering reminder of the Civil War and why it became a necessary part of history.

LaDonna says

A truly great read...

Why can't 4.5 be an option?

Daren Wang truly wowed me with his debut novel, **The Hidden Light of Northern Fires**. From the setting to the characters to the plot, I was mesmerized from the start. Before Daren Wang, I had never heard of Town Line, NY-- the only town north of the Mason Dixon Line to secede from the Union, during the Civil War. (It didn't rejoin until 1946!) Enough of the history lesson...

“None have freedom until all do,” [Nathan Willis] said.

Yes, we are introduced to our central character, abolitionist Mary Willis, at the onset. Apparently, it is her journal, newspapers archives and family home that serve as the inspiration for the book. However, Wang does an excellent job of creating a world and story that seems as if it could be factually based. With the Civil War and the “peculiar institution” of slavery as the central backdrops to the story, we are drawn into a tale unlike any other. Mary's forbidden love for the fugitive slave, Joe. Her lazy and shiftless brother, Leander. Yates Bell, the psychopathic and obsessed owner of Joe. And, Charles Webster, the strong, but oft silent, neighbor of the Willis family.

“We all start over again.....,” [Charles Webster] said.

It was the juxtaposition of the characters that drew me in from the very beginning. Black versus white. Northerner versus Southerner. Immigrant versus immigrant. Female versus male. Wang works extremely hard to ensure that all perspectives are heard and represented in his work.

“I was in the army,” Leander said. “It was the hardest thing I ever did”.

“I was a slave,” Palmer said. “That wasn’t much fun either”.

With all the praise, why not 5 stars?

Personally, I expected to see more of the factual evidence that serves as Wang’s foundation to be included in the work. Or, at least, a few footnotes when real-life people or situations were included in the novel. (Thank goodness for Google).

Overall, I highly recommend this book!! And, I am grateful to be a winner of the St. Martin’s Press Book Giveaway. I am freely sharing this unsolicited review. The advanced reader's copy was well worth the read. I am quite sure that **The Hidden Light of Northern Fires** will be well received when it is released this fall.

Josh says

The Hidden Light of Northern Fires, Darren Wang’s creative reimagining of the true story of a small northern town that voted to secede with the south -- as experienced by a white abolitionist woman and a fugitive slave -- is a page turning yarn and is worth recommending for that reason alone. But beyond being a great story, I was delighted to have my mind opened to the radical possibilities of historical fiction to illuminate and explore perspectives outside of the dominant narratives – something Wang accomplishes without falling into excessive sentimentality or caricature. I’m not usually a big reader of historical fiction, but Darren Wang has shown me the (hidden) light, and its cross-genre appeal warrants the start of a new section in our store: Historical Fiction For Those Who Don’t Usually Read Historical Fiction.

Nissa says

This book was so fascinating! I found this to be a highly readable and eye-opening account of the unsung roles that women played during the Civil War. While men fought at the front, women were making their own sacrifices and contributions. I couldn't wait to keep reading to find out what happened next and I learned so much! I want to read other Civil War books so I can learn more information about this fascinating time period in American history. This is a great book for any Civil War fan and I highly recommend. I received a free ARC of this book in a Goodreads giveaway. Thanks so much, Love it!

Cynthia says

The first thing you'll probably want to know about The Hidden Light of Northern Fires is what makes it different enough to read another Civil War saga. One answer is how well it's written another is how real and heart warming the characters are. Of course there's lots of partisanship but it's not the focus of the book, even the bad guys are nuanced and some change over the course of the book, almost all of them grow...for better or worse. There are touching love stories especially the main one is almost worthy of a romance novel.

There are meaningful references to classic literature. People work hard if that's her won't and some party hard to there detriment. Everyone in the book is deeply involved in one side or the other and I learned some history I'd never read about prior.

I think the cover art is stunning, to me it looks like a detail taken from a Turner painting. The references to Lincoln are significant but mostly used to say something about the characters' point of view. Speaking of point of view it's mostly from the two main characters' heads but there are at least two more minor characters whose thoughts we read about. I like the way Wang illustrates how strong hate can be and how motivating yet how inter mixed with love it often is to the point it's hard to tell the difference but back to my main premise...Hidden is significant and different enough to hold your attention and since, like me, you're interested enough in the history of this time and place o read a few reviews by other addicts I'd say Hidden is well worth your time.

4.5/5 stars

Thank you o the publisher for providing and e- copy.

Carol says

CIVIL WAR - 1861-1865

\$1000 REWARD. Joe Bell is a fugitive slave on the run....he didn't want to run....he didn't want to leave sister Alaura behind at Walnut Grove Plantation....but he had no choice....and Yates Bell wants him DEAD!

Mary Willis is a 23 year old university-educated strong-willed spinster who is bored with farm life....AND the local boys in Town Line, New York, but she soon finds purpose to her daily routine....a secret and dangerous new endeavor....helping runaway slaves. (*no spoiler here*)

Father Nathan wears the pants in the family....runs the farm and the mill....a big man in the town he founded, and **Brother Leander**....well, he just wants to hang with his friends and get off the farm to give big city life a go.

THE HIDDEN LIGHT OF NORTHERN FIRES is a work of historical fiction laced with facts from the past during a time of great upheaval in America, and Daren Wang's memory, creativity and research behind an old forgotten diary in his childhood home....the Willis home....brings to life this amazing story. A fine debut, but oh I wanted more!

Many thanks to NetGalley and St. Martin's Press for the ARC in exchange for an honest review.

Brenda Ayala says

This one is hard to rate. On the surface I love it--it's in the civil war era which is always fascinating and not nearly as popular in literature. It has romance and violence and cowards and stout-hearted men and women.

It has everything it needs to be a smash hit, and really it was.

I just don't love it. I can't tell you why, or give reasons. It boils down to this: I did not connect with the characters so I was always a bit removed from their troubles and woes.

Mary was probably my favorite character. She was stubborn and a little self centered but she lassoed those traits and made them work for her and for others. Her brother, however, had the same traits and decided to be a scoundrel with them. His redemption was nice if a little presumed.

The love triangle was unusual and I appreciated the author's ability to weave the stories together. Normally they're irritating as hell but this time I liked both choices and I selfishly liked how it turned out in the end.

There also seemed to be a great deal of historical accuracy! I don't remember as much as I would like about the period, but basically everything I could remember was included in the novel. It was a plus that I probably should've expected but didn't, so I was pleasantly surprised.

I'll round myself up to 4 stars just because I think my brain is dumb.

Karen Kay says

I received this ARC from netgalley.com in exchange for a review.

School educated Mary Willis has always been an outcast, an outspoken abolitionist woman in a town of bounty hunters and anti-Union farmers. Helping runaways is the only thing that makes her life in Town Line bearable.

The story is told from multiple perspectives and gave a good view of people and the political opinions of the time. I felt the story dragged in some places but overall a good read.

3.5? rounded up to 4?

Cheri says

''How did he become president when so few people voted for him? Did he cheat? Did he steal the election? I don't know, but the question must be asked.' He stood in front of a farmer missing his front teeth. 'What do you think, Klaus?' The farmer looked around, surprised to be addressed. 'Maybe,' he said. 'We might never know,' the preacher said. 'I do not believe he is our real president. He is not my president. Is he yours?''

This story begins around the time of the hanging of abolitionist John Brown, who led a raid on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia in order to liberate the slaves there. Tensions escalated, leading to John Brown being hanged in Charles Town, Virginia, 02 Dec 1859. Later on, 20 June, 1863, West Virginia began the Secessionist Convention that eventually resulted in its breaking away from the Confederate state of Virginia, but at this point in time, there was no "West" Virginia, only Virginia.

The year is 1861, and the voting citizens of Town Line, New York have informally gathered, 125 white men,

to discuss a resolution to secede from the United States. A resolution to secede is passed by a vote of 85 to 40. This unincorporated community, a hamlet, in the Buffalo-Niagara Falls Metro area is close to Canada, so some fled to live in Canada, five joined the Confederacy on the other side of the Mason-Dixon line in Northern Virginia, and 20 men left to fight for the Union.

Legally, this resolution to secede had no effect, and was never recognized by either the Union or the Confederacy in any formal sense.

All of this is recognized historically as accurate despite there being no written records, but the town lived with this status until 24 January 1946, when they voted to rejoin the Union. The vote was 90 to 23 to rescind the previous vote, although they had a vote not long before that that failed to reach this conclusion. But 1946 was a different year, when pride was high in the returning warriors from WWII, and those who had fought wanted their recognition for having fought for the country they at least thought they were a part of until they were informed otherwise.

Mary Willis is a young, unmarried woman, by our more modern definitions, but was considered a “spinster” in those days, having reached the nearly ancient age of 23 without landing a husband, not that she saw herself that way. She was, after all, educated, well read and opinionated. In her effort to pursue a more fulfilling life, she receives an advanced education on the ways of the secret routes and safe houses of the Underground Railroad.

Joe Bell was a slave, although technically freed by his owner, the owner’s son is dedicated to hunting him down and making him pay – one way or another. Mary, of course, is more dedicated to protecting him at all costs.

Yates Bell, the son of Joe Bell’s former owner, is out to retrieve Joe and haul him back to Harper’s Ferry, despite his father, to prevent his own ruination.

Leander Willis, brother to Mary, has only one goal: pleasure. He is lazy, but even when he can manage to motivate himself to perform some grand gesture; its sole purpose is to garner praise for him.

Charles Webster, neighbor and family friend, who quietly pines after the woman he loves from afar. Friends will betray friends, loyalties are questioned over and over, while grand, noble ideals are met with the glaring truth of the way things are, a country and a people divided over what is right and what is wrong.

Maybe my hopes or expectations were too high, but I didn’t connect to this as much as I’d hoped, although the writing is often lovely and the premise of this debut novel interesting and unique. However, the characters of Joe Bell and Mary Willis did stand out above the rest and were wonderful, complex, characters, I felt their passion in their beliefs, their hopes for a better future, someday.

”To wake to that perfect white blanket covering the fields, the whole world made new overnight. It’s then that you know God forgives, that there’s mercy in this world.”

Daren Wang, the author, is the Executive Director of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution Decatur Book Festival, has some obvious experience with our favourite topic – books! I look forward to reading more from him in the future.

”None have freedom until all do”

Pub Date: 29 Aug 2017

Many thanks for the ARC provided by St. Martin's Press!

Melissa Crytzer Fry says

I'm always excited when a new chapter of seemingly well-known history can be brought to light. And in this book, I was, indeed, surprised to learn about a town in New York, during the Civil War, that was sympathetic to Confederates and quite vocal about being anti-Union. I also had no clue that Confederate deserters flocked to Canada – an irony considering that they were headed to the same destination as slaves.

I confess that I also am always enthusiastic to learn of the genesis of certain books – especially when authors have an intriguing story to tell. In his prologue, debut author Daren Wang shares a tale that ties his family's own history to this story's history. It is both remarkable and intriguing (and makes me a bit green with envy, as I have no such familial stories to share – ha ha)!

This book promises tension and heartache and reveals humanity's resiliency, the power of the human spirit to prevail. It's a story about love, tribulations, conflict, and a wide cast of characters. In fact, I believed the story would be Mary's, alone, given the jacket copy, but it turned out that we inhabited the points of view of another half dozen characters, whose story this was in equal measure. As a result, I felt we didn't get quite enough of each of them; in my greed for emotional connection, I simply wanted more from all of them!

For fans of Civil War historical fiction (who also love strong female protagonists -- this one based on the real-life Mary Willis), this is a fast read about a fascinating period in American history that you might not have known about either. If you're a history nerd (like me), you're likely to enjoy this novel. For me this book, overall, was a 3.5 to 3.75, rounded up!

Haris Mohammad says

The Hidden Light of Northern Fires is a baroque and vibrant read. A cool and fresh angle on a brand-new branch of the Civil War. The cast of characters are absolutely human, admirably assorted, and the anecdotal articulation is decidedly apprehensible, in aciculate adversity with the bersek blood-soaked aberration of that aphotic bit in annals of American history.
