



Buffalo Soldier

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Editorial Choice:

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BfK Rating:

5

There was a buffalo soldier in the heart of America/Stolen from Africa, brought to America/Fighting on arrival, fighting for survival?

Tanya Landman's new novel is as powerful as the Bob Marley song with which it shares its name, and fleshes out the history alluded to in its sparse lyrics in utterly compelling fashion. This is the story of Company W, a cavalry regiment of recently freed African-American slaves who fought with immense valour throughout the Civil War and the 'Indian Wars' that followed, despite unimaginable hardship and prejudice. And it is the story of Charley O'Hara, a freed girl slave who becomes a boy soldier in order to survive after the passing of the 13th amendment, only to find herself in a different kind of captivity: 'If you're good enough to die for your country, ain't you good enough to live in it?', she asks?

In her illuminating Author's Note at the back of the book, Landman explains how Charley's story seized her 'by the throat' and wouldn't let her go, after she read about the so-called 'Negro soldiers' of the 9th and 10th Cavalry Regiments, and a freed slave named Cathy Williams during her research for her CILIP Carnegie shortlisted novel, **Apache**. The writing of **Buffalo Soldier** took a lot of 'wrong paths' she tells us but every time she thought it would never be finished 'Charley appeared, standing at my elbow and nudging me along until I'd finished writing her story'.

There are so many reasons to admire this book, and one of them is the voice of Charley herself. In this first-person narrative, Landman nails her southern inflexions from the outset, and sustains them beautifully - and completely convincingly for the next 350+ pages. She weaves memorable idiom into Charley's speech too: when her adopted mother-figure, Cookie gets together with a man, they 'jump the broom', whilst notions unfold in Charley's head 'like a blanket'.

Buffalo Soldier also provides a compelling history lesson about a period of American history probably most familiar to British readers from **Gone With the Wind** and cowboy films (although Buffalo Bill Cody does make a cameo appearance). Though many young readers will know something about the abolition of slavery, Landman's novel will confront them with the truth about the many thousands of 'free' slaves for whom the kind of liberty which would allow them live their lives as they might have wished remained a pipe dream. As Charley puts it: 'I thought when freedom came we was all gonna be sitting out on the porch sipping mint juleps'.

Landman is utterly unflinching in her portrayal of the all-pervading inhumanity which was unleashed across America

during the second half of the 19th century: the lynchings of blacks by whites; the scalplings and mutilation of white settlers by native Americans in defence of their lands, and the slaughter of those natives by the US army, bent on eliminating 'hostiles' and claiming swathes of territory for the infant nation that was the US of A. It is at times, a pitiless narrative, and not for the faint reader.

But those who steel themselves for an often brutal narrative will be amply rewarded with both a terrific story, and as thought-provoking a book on friendship, prejudice and above all the meaning of freedom as you could hope to find. America might be the Land of the Free but at what cost came that freedom? God Bless Charley for elbowing its author into telling us so bloodily but so brilliantly.

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