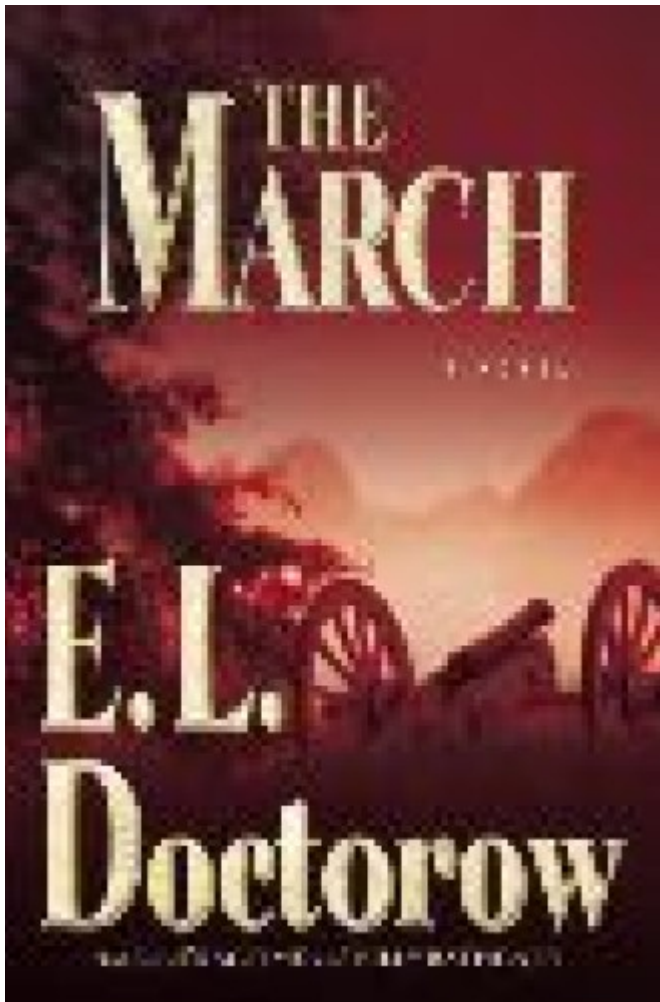


BookMarks

reviewed by [Gordon Houser](#) in the [April 4, 2006](#) issue

In Review



The March

E .L. Doctorow

Random House

On a rainy Georgia night near the end of the Civil War, a soldier named Arly, who is more interested in survival than piety, addresses God about his young companion

Will, who “thinks an army at war is a reasonable thing. . . . He thinks we live in a sane life and time, which you know as well as I is not what you designed for us sinners.”

E. L. Doctorow’s 11th novel follows William Tecumseh Sherman’s 1864 march of 60,000 troops and numerous refugees through Georgia and up into the Carolinas. Doctorow describes this mass of people as “a great segmented body moving in contractions and dilations at a rate of twelve or fifteen miles a day, a creature of a hundred thousand feet.” Doctorow crafts a narrative that delves into the lives of a dozen or so characters with incisive detail yet moves along at a riveting pace. This is the rare novel that rewards readers seeking both literary excellence and a gripping story.

True to the times, the book includes the pious talk of people from North and South, yet talk and acts of faith are overshadowed by the insanity of war, which Doctorow finds creative ways of naming. Stephen Walsh, a Union soldier, escapes death in a creek but bumps into a severed head that is “appealing to him as if, given even this experience, life could seem still to be desirable.” Later he calls the burning of Columbia, South Carolina, a hell “without ascription. It is life when it can no longer tolerate itself.”

As the marchers cross the countryside, picking up slaves set free by fleeing owners and skirmishing with scattered Confederate soldiers, the novel presents an array of characters from various walks of life. Most are fictional, but General Sherman makes more than a casual appearance. Doctorow treats him more kindly than his reputation does. The impetus behind his march is to end an awful war as quickly as possible, and some of the destruction happens against Sherman’s orders, as when drunken soldiers burn much of Columbia. Sherman, who loses two young sons during the war, becomes a fuller, more human character.

Other characters include Pearl, a freed slave girl with a white father; Arly and Will, two Rebel soldiers who infiltrate the Union side; Wrede Sartorius, a Union regimental surgeon; Emily Thompson, the daughter of a southern judge, who becomes a nurse; and Stephen Walsh, a conscientious Union soldier who falls in love with Pearl.

One motif is disguise. Arly and Will dress as Union soldiers to escape death. Pearl dresses as a drummer boy in order to travel with the troops. These disguises help them to survive the hell of war at a time when survival has become people’s chief

goal. The disguises also point to the way trauma unmasks pretention.

Doctorow's adept use of language is evident throughout. He captures the diction of the various characters—sometimes flowery (“General Johnston and his colleagues of the unjust cause, now embittered and awash in defeat, will have sublimed to a righteously aggrieved state that would empower them for a century”), sometimes colloquial (“Ifn you know yo Bible, Miss Porhl, you ’member ’bout dat Jez’bel”). His descriptions show the influence of that time (“It was the kind of raw spring day when the energies of rebirth seem ominous and one’s own blood races nervously in its course”) and of any time (“War changed the weather, it whitened the day—a pungent smoke flew past him like the souls of the dead hurrying to Heaven”).

The March reveals the specific, intimate events of lives caught in conflict while also pointing to universal themes. Sherman reflects about General Grant’s solemnity at the end of the war that “this unmeaning inhuman planet will need our warring imprint to give it value, and that our civil war, the devastating manufacture of the bones of our sons, is but a war after a war, a war before a war.”

Several characters search for more than survival. Stephen and Pearl take in an orphaned slave. Later Pearl gives the son of her former owners one of her last coins. To this boy who had mistreated her and other slaves she says, “Nothin you will ever do in your life will be enough to pay us back.”

Doctorow’s outstanding novel paints vividly the quest of a few to maintain human kindness amid the hell of wartime. It serves as a picture of the past and a prophecy for the present.