

Coal Black Horse by Robert Olmstead recommended by Sarah Collins Honenberger

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Sarah Collins Honenberger—Orange resident and author of the novel *White Lies*—recommends *Coal Black Horse* by Robert Olmstead. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Although I left Massachusetts years ago, I've never understood the South's fascination with the Civil War. In the face of enormous suffering on the battlefield and back home, a cost that trickles even now through daily life below the Mason-Dixon, how can smart, honest people still mourn the end of a world founded on standards of conduct that subjugated all but a small circle of elite white men?

Robert Olmstead's *Coal Black Horse* shows us why.

A 14-year-old follows his mother's orders: find your father, bring him home from the war. The plot is that simple. We know the ending.

With Robey Childs, we slog through mud and dust and the evil of men to reach Gettysburg where his father waits with the dying. What Robey sees, we see: the "snake-rail fence," the "sling of the mountain," a "flush of vultures," the blacksmith "intent on the blue-straw color crawling up the metal from the depths of the forge." Olmstead's subtle turns of 19th-century slang and cadence of hoof beats draw us into this boy's journey to manhood. Robey understands his task, but not the terrain over which he will have to scabble past greedy and selfish men; his childhood lost in the haunted smoke of burnt corpses, only to replace his father in the adult world.

The boy and the horse carry us through neglected towns guarded by frightened women, beyond firelit headquarters of officers weary of the futility, to shadowed barns where Robey hides and is confronted instead with a different kind of inhumanity. Olmstead's skill—strong

verbs, sensory details, nary a cliché—is paramount in Robey's subtle grace as he realizes his father's plea for another day of rest means something else entirely. When the inevitable happens, without histrionics or trumpets the son becomes the father. "He did not understand it, but he knew he was no longer afraid of death. He knew he no longer felt the half of something but felt whole and finished in his making."

The darkness of war blares from Olmstead's graphic prose, his unique, gritty way of making readers smell the rankness of dead soldiers and gag at scavengers who slash jaws of the half-dead for gold fillings. Robey thinks, "with all these men dead fighting war, it must be that war was winning."

But after the father's predictable death, the son must take home the news of his failure. In this informal afterword, four chapters, forty pages, Olmstead lets loose the fireworks of his talent for narrative fiction. And proves a point he made years earlier at a writing conference. I'd just started writing a novel about a couple whose son dies in a car crash when the father is driving. I described how the father disappears and returns at harvest, forcing the mother to decide whether to let him stay. "It's about a couple who stay together after losing a child," I boasted.

Olmstead replied, "If you know the ending, it's not fiction." An argument ensued.

He was right and I was wrong. Olmstead didn't know the ending when he started writing *Coal Black Horse*. Robey didn't know it when he left home. They carry us beyond the known to a place we've never been, through the "corrugated up thrust of every folded mountain." The

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Civil War context, chosen deliberately, is ignored in the intensity of the journey. Olmstead's resonating take on fathers and sons will make it easy for the prize givers to recognize the bril-

liance. And it explains why this transplanted Yankee now lists a Civil War novel as one of her favorites.