

***THE BLACK FLOWER*, by Howard Bahr**

- ❖ **WHO** is the author?
- ❖ **WHAT** has he/she written?
- ❖ **WHY** should you want to read it?
- ❖ **HOW** can you use it in your classroom?
- ❖ **HOW ELSE** can you use it in your classroom?

WHO?

Howard Bahr has a couple of interesting literary connections in his background. First, he was born in Meridian, Mississippi, home of Scout Finch's best friend, Dill. Second, from 1982—1993 he was the curator of Rowan Oak, the William Faulkner homestead and museum in Oxford, Mississippi. Whether the first had any impact upon him is hard to say, but apparently the second was time well spent.

WHAT?

Bahr's novel *The Black Flower* is the first in a trilogy that focuses both directly and tangentially on the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee (aka "The Gettysburg of the West"), from the eve of the Civil War battle through its immediate aftermath. *The Black Flower* Traces the experiences and encounters of Mississippi rifleman Bushrod Carter before, during, and after the cataclysmic battle. The next two novels in the series, *The Year of Jubilo* and *The Judas Field*, are set immediately after the war and several years later respectively, but both use frequent flashbacks. Although parts of *The Year of Jubilo* contain the best scenes in the series, the book as a whole attempts to cover too much ground. The third suffers in comparison to the first two, but is still worth reading if you want to know a little more about some of the periphery characters of the other novels. *The Black Flower*, however, is a gem—the sort of book you buy so that you can lend it to people you care about.

WHY?

Although to describe Bahr as an "accessible Faulkner" may sound oxymoronic, it's at least a starting point for understanding the appeal of *The Black Flower Trilogy*. Bahr manages to pay homage to Faulkner's sense of the interconnection of time, place, and people without forcing the reader to come up for air in the midst of a sentence. A myriad of good, bad, not-so-good, and not-so-bad characters meet and interact in and around the battle. As with all historic fiction, it's fair to say that some writers know their era; others know people. It's a short list of writers who understand both. Shelby Foote is definitely

one; Daniel Woodrell might be another. Howard Bahr certainly needs to be added to the list.

You don't have to know, or even care, a lot about The Civil War to be drawn into the lives of the characters in Bahr's work, but if you do you happen to know something about the period, you can tell right away that Bahr's done his homework. Some writers know people; others know the war. The ones that know the war better than they know people seem to make it a point to work in as much extraneous detail as possible. Bahr avoids this trap. The war serves as both background and catalyst for what these particular people happen to be going through, but the focus remains on the characters themselves. They are ordinary (or in some cases *not* so ordinary) people caught up in a world where extraordinary events have been thrust upon them. Most realize that with much luck, some of them may actually have the chance to try to return to their old way of life, but even so they realize that it will no longer be the world they left behind. They must keep on keeping on as best they can in a world that only occasionally resembles the one they left behind.

War is a mix of the mundane and the banal, periodically interspersed with moments of the unbelievable and unendurable. Bahr creates an uncanny mix of the credible and the incredible. Early in the novel Bahr introduces the reader to fifty-two year old "*Calvin Jones, Professor of Music at the Cumberland Female Academy ...a man born for dim recital halls where dust floated in the twilight and young girls frowned at the fingerboards of their violins.*" Despite his better judgement, Jones allows himself to be drawn into the final stages of an already lost cause by volunteering to serve as a regimental musician. In this particular battle scene, notice how Bahr manages to juxtapose the extraordinary with the ordinary. As readers we never forget that these are flesh and blood people, not wooden historical figures, who must deal with this nightmare world:

They played through "Annie Laurie" three times and the Professor was getting weary of the tune and almost wished something would happen, then he stumbled and bruised his lips on the mouthpiece of his horn. He turned his head to spit, and when he looked again the Principal Musician, almost frantic with excitement, had turned to face them and was walking backward, his baton held horizontally over his head—

Like on parade, the Professor thought, as the band ceased playing and the drums began to beat cadence. It's just like he was on parade—

Their leader opened his mouth, said something that none of them could hear, opened his mouth again, shouted, "Dixie's Land"! Give them 'Dixie,' boys! and lowered his baton. The band began to play the quickstep; the Principal Musician seized his baton by the ball end, threw it up in the air, turned with a flourish as the baton twirled above him; the Principal Musician put out his gloved hand and made a perfect catch and evaporated in a blinding flash of light, in a spray of blood and bone and flesh that spattered the men in the front rank even as the concussion of the shell knocked them sprawling and the rest marched through the empty space where the Principal Musician had been—

That is not possible, thought the Professor—A man cannot simply disappear--

HOW?

It's hard for teenagers to believe that their own parents were once human beings, much less people who lived a century and a half ago. Note how Bahr works in enough detail to convey a sense of time and place, but still manages to present his characters as people, not historical figures.

Writing Assignment:

Think of some area of expertise or knowledge that you possess that most of your peers do not. Do you have a job? Are you a dancer? A skater? A musician? Maybe you've worked on cars or have read about some historical era or know a lot about mythology.

Using this "esoteric" (known by a select few) knowledge, describe a person performing a task that would be familiar for that character but would be unfamiliar for your reader.

HOW ELSE?

Consider showing *Pharaoh's Army* starring Chris Cooper, Patricia Clarkson, and Kris Kristofferson. Observe the frenzied anguish Patricia Clarkson feels when her child's grave is desecrated by Union sympathizers. Later observe how the Union captain portrayed by Chris Cooper takes comfort from the strenuous yet familiar task of plowing Patricia Clarkson's fields.

You might also consider showing a clip from Episode # 8 of Ken Burns documentary, *The Civil War* to establish an historic yet human context for the Battle of Franklin.