



All Souls' Rising

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In setting and in scope, ALL SOULS' RISING marks a new departure for Madison Smartt Bell. His early books, beginning with THE WASHINGTON SQUARE ENSEMBLE (1983), focused on a few characters in the New York underworld, while SOLDIER'S JOY (1989) concerned two Vietnam veterans in the rural South, and DOCTOR SLEEP (1991) involved a London hypnotherapist. By contrast, ALL SOULS' RISING is a historical novel with a huge cast. Again, however, Bell's subject is the dark side of human nature.

Thus the novel begins with Bell's primary observer, the French physician Antoine Hebert, happening upon a crucified slave. Although the slaveowner, Michel Arnaud, has a justification for his barbaric behavior, such actions made an insurrection inevitable. When the landowners order a trusted slave, Toussaint Louverture, to stir up a small rebellion, so as to frighten free mulattoes and poor whites into their political party, their scheme backfires. Bell shows how this good man, forced into leadership of the slaves, comes to sanction cruel acts which are alien to his nature.

Bell's method of illuminating history is to focus on individual. Thus he penetrates the minds of the half-savage Riau, the malicious Choufleur, the two Arnauds, and the courtesan Nanon, the heroine of the novel. After almost overwhelming horror, ALL SOULS' RISING ends on a note of hope, with Hebert, Manon, and their baby arriving at the plantation now owned by Hébert's sister. When her little girl embraces her new cousin, it is suggested that those who survived the debacle can build a new and better Haiti. That Bell intends his story as a warning for contemporary readers is clear from the epilogue. Evil deeds, he writes, will always produce dire consequences.

Sources for Further Study

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