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Soldier's Joy

By Madison Smartt Bell

Ticknor & Fields, 465 pp.

The year is 1970. Thomas Laidlaw returns from Vietnam to his family's now-deserted farm outside of Nashville. A loner, Laidlaw wants little more than peace, freedom to roam the landscape, and time to hone his considerable talents as a bluegrass banjo player. He's been half a world away dispensing and avoiding death.

But when your best friend is black and you live where the Klan is intent on teaching lessons, finding the chance to re-establish the rhythms of a benign civilian life proves difficult, then impossible.

Bell shows again the stunning power that has marked him as one of the most important of America's young generation of fiction writers. Having chronicled the seamiest sides of life in New York City in his earlier novels, he returns here to the native Tennessee he has mined before only in his short story "The Naked Lady," included in *Best American Short Stories, 1984*.

Early on, Tennessee seems the ideal place to heal from a disorienting war. Bell's minutely observed description makes Laidlaw's deliberate actions feel like Nick Adams returning to the Big Two-Hearted River, his farm an arcadian balm to his senses: "He'd slept all the way through to the evening chatter of the birds. Barn swallows whirled and darted all around the path of a cable that ran from house to barn, their forked tails lashing against the royal sunset colors of the sky. Half dazed from sleep, Laidlaw saw their movement sketching out bar upon bar of what, it seemed to him, might just as well have been a song."

Then comes Laidlaw's reunion with his black childhood friend and Vietnam comrade Rodney Redmon, and Laidlaw learns he has only left one war zone for another.

Though the setting from his earlier novels has changed, Bell's themes and strengths remain the same. Again we see how elements congeal to inspire alienation and violence. Again we have rich and complex characters whose hopes lend them interest and weight even as their world disintegrates around them. And again we have Bell's sparkling deadly accurate prose moving with glacial implacability toward a dark resolution which men may blame but not control. Once more, Bell spins a tale of life lived close to the bone and keeps us in its grip right up to the final word.