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## **THEORY OF WAR**

By Joan Brady

Alfred A. Knopf. 261 pp.

Joan Brady prefaces this biographical novel with a striking disclosure: it will be a fictionalized account of her grandfather's life, from his boyhood as a slave to his death by voluntary starvation and the legacy of "emotional skids and dark anger that taint anybody...even at the distance of two generations away from slavery." This legacy, Brady contends, caused four of his seven children, including the author's father, to kill themselves and caused Brady's sister to show the same personality symptoms as an alcoholic's offspring. "*Theory of War*," Brady writes, "is an attempt to understand what my grandfather might have felt about what he'd gone through, and what we--his descendants--still have to cope with because of it."

This shouldn't sound uncommon in a country whose first two and a half centuries suffered lawful slavery and whose subsequent history bears slavery's legacy. Except that Brady is white, as was her grandfather.

Brady's narrator/persona, Malory Carrick, 45, has flown from her (and Brady's) village of Devon, England to Washington state to learn from an alcoholic physician uncle about her slave grandfather, Jonathan Carrick.

At age four, Jonathan was sold in 1865 for \$15 by his apparently destitute Union veteran father to Alvah Stoke of Sweetbrier, Kansas. Jonathan was to work on Stoke's tobacco farm until age 21, when he would receive \$25, a saddle and freedom. As a "boughten boy," the smiling, chattering child quickly becomes a morose piece of chattel, pitied by the townspeople, sleeping on a dirt floor and enduring the torments of Stoke's son, George. Yet Jonathan is the brightest person on the farm. He teaches himself elementary reading from George's McGuffey reader, invents a convenient way to pluck worms from tobacco leaves and tries repeatedly to run away.

At 16, Jonathan beats George, he believes, to death. A railroad stationmaster helps him escape Sweetbrier by hopping a train headed west. After years of dangerous railroad jobs, first yardman then brakeman, Jonathan hears the voice of Jesus and becomes a Methodist minister, hoping that religion might satisfy his lifelong obsession for ultimate truth. But then he learns years later that the George Stoke who persecuted his childhood is not only alive but the Democratic senator from Kansas. Jonathan loses his faith and returns to Sweetbrier. Contracting malaria en route, he arrives almost delirious. Once again, he is saved by the stationmaster, whose daughter, Sarah, nurses Jonathan and becomes his wife.

Love sits uneasily on Jonathan. His involuntary servitude had taught him to rein his emotions tight, to keep feelings invisible. Jonathan's life, Brady insists, was a war. The Stokes were the enemy, and Jonathan was alone on the other side. So, a loving wife doesn't add warmth and color to Jonathan's world. She exposes his flanks to attack. She renders him vulnerable. This bitter alienation stunts the lives of Sarah, their children and their grandchildren. Malory's uncle saw Jonathan laugh only once, sharing memories of

slavery with a black employee. The black former slave and Jonathan were, Jonathan proclaims, brothers.

But were they really? Both with and without the Malory mask, Brady consistently implies that her grandfather was an American slave like countless other American slaves, and that she knows truly what it is to descend from slavery.

She overreaches. She has no more justifiable claim to black America's history than cotton planters had to its labor. The differences between Jonathan's servitude and that of African-Americans are too great. Jonathan's cultural roots were never obliterated. He was never taught his entire race was inadequate. Jonathan didn't look like a slave. Few black slaves would have enjoyed the town's pity or received help escaping or been able to hide their previous servitude or experience all the rights of citizenship upon achieving freedom.

Most importantly, as a laborer bound only to age 21, Jonathan was not a slave at all but an involuntarily indentured servant. The effect on the shaping of his consciousness would be dramatic, but would not be a slave's. The difference between knowing you will be free some day and believing you will never be free is the difference between hope and hopelessness, the distinction Dante drew between purgatory and hell.

Although the basic premise of her novel totters, Brady could still have written a riveting tale of an American atrocity. She tries. She mentions tiny Jonathan's hovel, his being tied up, chained and denied education despite his quick intellect, his being beaten. She sketches Jonathan's having all of his teeth pulled and sold to a traveling salesman.

Yet, for all the talk about "the uncompromising ferocity, the raw passions of slavery," Brady seldom portrays them vividly. Where it is crucial to show, Brady tells. Later incidents are rendered more strikingly: a preacher revealing bleeding stigmata in a saloon, an Indian midwife saving Sarah's life during childbirth, a crazed bull knocking the adult Jonathan across a field. But the horrors of Jonathan's indenture, upon which Brady predicates his bitter life and the agony of two succeeding generations, seem scanted.

Even if they weren't, the novel would be crippled by Malory's unreliability as narrator and Brady's histrionics and pontifical intrusions. If this true tale accounts for many ruined lives, Brady is unwise to have her narrator comment speciously that "truth (whatever it is) is sometimes truer when you make it up" or forget whether the first moon landing was 20 or 30 years ago or state that "true patriotism, true hatred of the enemy" didn't exist before the French Revolution. Her war metaphor for Jonathan's life, weak and arch even at first, grows tediously overextended. Most irritating are Brady's editorial homilies--"as to our relationships with other people, we play at manners and morals, but we only play, just as states do"--often not only digressive but vacuous: "Jonathan was only fourteen or so, and young males are among the stupidest of the stupid young." Bewildered whether to be novelist or sage, Brady often fails to be either.