According to historian Shelby Foote, the Civil War produced two authentic geniuses: Abraham Lincoln and Nathan Bedford Forrest.

A plantation owner and slave trader, Forrest enlisted in the Confederate Army as a private and rose to the rank of general. Inspiring, intimidating and courageous -- 30 horses were shot out from under him -- he was a brilliant practitioner of mobile warfare, who used cavalry like 20th-century generals would use motorized infantry, "to git thar fust with the most men."

Forrest was also complex, contradictory and controversial. He commanded the loyalty of his slaves, at least eight of whom fought alongside him. He may have condoned or conducted a massacre of African-American Union troops at Fort Pillow in Henning, Tenn., in 1864. He joined the Ku Klux Klan a few years later.

The "stuff" of which historical fiction is made, Forrest has found his novelist in Madison Smartt Bell. Born and raised in Nashville, Bell knows the sights, smells, sins and syntax of the Civil War South. His narrative, moving on and then off the battlefield, back and forth in time, is lush and lively, taut and tense.

In Bell's novel, Forrest is a lion. And he's lionized as a man of honor, as tough on himself as he is on others, and determined to be beholden to no one, not even God.

"They say the world itself turns like a grindstone," he says, while sharpening his sword. "Over and over. Don't never stop .... You may whet yoreself agin it. Or let it grind ye down."

Bell's sympathy for his subject, however, complicates and compromises his treatment of slavery. It makes you wonder about the relationship between the fictional and the "real" Nathan Bedford Forrest.

Bell's Forrest is loyal to his "folks," white and black. "All I own I'll own up to," he proclaims. When trading slaves, he never breaks up families. As a Confederate officer, he promises to emancipate any slave who joins his company. At Fort Pillow, he orders his men to hold their fire.

And throughout "Devil's Dream," the only man or woman he ever strikes, slashes, or shoots is a Yankee soldier.

Equally important, Bell seems to endorse Forrest's "realism," by turns existential and fatalistic, as a legitimate response to the
South's "Negro problem." When Matthew, his black son, asks him to "recognize me ... to own up to me," Forrest replies: "Son ... I'll tell you one thing. All that ye can really own is your actions. Because that's the only thing that's truly in yore hand."

He also insists that "ye take what you're given. Fer ye ain't got no choice." Matthew cost him "all I could give and then some," he tells Catharine, his black "wife."

Because "you can jest picture how Old Miss would cotton to him back home," the best he can do is leave the boy with her and pay for him to learn to be a saddler-maker. Will Catharine's children ever be free?

"I'll tell you one thing," Forrest sighs. "What I'd like to know is will I ever be." Catharine laughs, but Bell lets Forrest off the hook for an equation that he might have had her regard as an obscenity, by adding, "there seemed to be no bitterness in it."

No word, not even the "n" one, we're reminded, means very much to Bell's Forrest. "It's what's inside your skin that counts. Bone and gristle. Blood and heart." For him, it's all about doing and riding on and never looking back.

These are salutary sentiments. But they provide cold comfort to a slave.