McBride’s ‘Good Lord Bird’ a saucy, suspenseful, poignant and powerful novel

DR GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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In the late 1850s, Henry Shackelford, the narrator of “The Good Lord Bird,” James McBride’s new novel, finds himself working in a brothel in “Bleeding Kansas,” the territory torn apart by the struggle over slavery.

The 12-year-old slave overhears a conversation between the proprietor and three of her customers. “I’d trust my slave with my life,” one of them says. Within weeks, Henry tells us, that slave drew a knife on his master.

“Like most things in life,” Henry realizes, “you don’t know nothing till you want to know it, and you don’t see what you don’t want to see, but all that talk about slavery was drawing water for something, and not long after, I found out.”

A reluctant member of the abolitionist “army” of John Brown, who thinks “the Onion” is a girl and his good luck charm, Henry participates in the raid on Harpers Ferry, a catalyst of the Civil War.

Infuriating references

“The Good Lord Bird” is loosely based on history. McBride’s portraits of John Brown (“his cheese had slid off his biscuit”), Harriet Tubman (the formidable “General” of the Underground Railroad), and, especially, of African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass (he had become a “man of parlor talk, of silk shirts and fine hats, linen suits and ties,” who imbued too many highballs and ogled too many women), are likely to infuriate readers in search of biographical exactitude.

His use of 20th-century idiomatic expressions – “ain’t worth squat,” “big time,” “mojo,” “everybody and his brother,” “don’t know you from Adam” – detracts at times from the narrative. Nonetheless, the novel is a tour de force that is, by turns, rousing and rollicking, saucy and suspenseful, poignant and powerful.

An accomplished musician, the author of a memoir (“The Color of Water”) and two previous works on fiction (“Miracle at St. Anna” and “Song Yet Sung”), McBride illuminates the past in “The Good Lord Bird” and sheds light on the myriad ways in which slavery and racism undermined the formation of individual identity.

“Lying come natural to all Negroes during slave time, for no man or woman in bondage ever prospered stating their true thoughts to the boss,” the Onion emphasizes.

Blacks and ‘trickerson’

Often, the lack of respect Whites had for Blacks subjected them to “trickerson.” Having thought through “every possibility without being seen,” slaves could make sure their lies matched what their masters wanted to hear. “When you in bondage and aiming on getting out,” he writes, “you make deals. You do what you got to do. You turn on who you got to.

And if the fish flips out the bucket and on you and jumps back in the lake, well, that’s too bad.”

Most importantly, “Henrietta” learns that living a lie takes its toll because nobody, yourself included, “knows who you are inside.”

Despite and because of Henry’s all-too-human character defects, conventional wisdom about the impact of slavery (and all forms of oppression) acquires an emotional as well as an intellectual potency in “The Good Lord Bird.” Treated like a thing, “a dog or a shovel or a horse,” the needs and wants of a slave “got no track,” Henry points out, “whether you is a girl or a boy, a woman or a man, or shy or fat, or don’t eat biscuits or can’t...
suffer the change of weather easily.”

And the lesson he learns takes on a universal significance. “You can play one part in life,” Henry declares, “but you can’t be that thing.” He had been a Negro, playing a part: “Hiding. Smiling. Pretending bondage is okay till they’re free.”

He now knew that “you is everything you are in this life at every moment.” That if you aren’t your own self, you cannot be free. That thought, he confesses, “pressed on my heart like a vice. Just mashed me down.” And before he or anyone else knew it, Henry Shackelford “was up the road and gone.”

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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