'Glory Over Everything: A melodrama that deals with brutality of slavery

April 21, 2016
Filed under ENTERTAINMENT, METRO
Posted by editor

BOOK REVIEW
Review of "Glory Over Everything: Beyond the Kitchen House" by Kathleen Grissom. Simon & Schuster. 370 pages. $25.99

BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

"Let me explain," Jamie Butler, the protagonist of "Glory Over Everything," says to the father of the young woman he has seduced. After hurling a glass paperweight at Jamie and then striking him across the face, Mr. Cardon yells, "You nigras are all the same! You will not leave the white women alone!” "It is claimed that my mother is part Negro," Jamie stammers. To which Cardon replies, "Part! Part! There is no such thing as part! Nigra is nigra!"

Set in Philadelphia, Virginia and North Carolina in the 1820s, this new novel by Kathleen Grissom (the author of "The Kitchen House") follows young Mr. Butler (the son and slave of a plantation owner), who has been passing as a White silversmith and painter, as he comes to terms with his racial identity.

"Glory Over Everything" is an old-fashioned melodrama. Delivered in the voices of the main characters, the narrative is filled with romance, villains, violence, courage, compassion, secrets and suspense.

"Glory Over Everything" does capture," at times movingly, the brutality of slavery and its impact on the day-to-day thoughts, feelings, and experiences of Blacks and Whites in antebellum America.

Kidnapped on the docks of Philadelphia and sold into slavery, Pan is befriended by Sukey, an agent of the Underground Railroad whose tongue had been cut out by her masters following an escape attempt. Sukey looks away when the young boy talks, "because he got those big eyes and sometimes they still got a smile left in them." When Pan asks her why she does not want to have a baby, Sukey writes on his hand, "they sell them.

"Glory Over Everything" also sends a powerful message about the emotional price paid by individuals who try to "pass." Halfway through the novel Jamie learns that Robert, his manservant, is half White. "You speak as though you carry no shame," he says. And Robert replies, "There is no shame in who I am. There is only shame in how I came to be, and that is not my burden to carry.

Exhibiting a compassion that Jamie had previously declined to attribute to African-Americans, Robert absolves his employer of blame for trying to pass. "Your road is the one I might easily have taken, given your coloring. Your choices are not for me to judge.

Upbeat ending
As is fitting for a novel about slavery, plenty of good people, most of them African-Americans, die in "Glory Over Everything." But like most authors of melodramas, Grissom provides her readers with an upbeat, happy ending.

Prompted by Pan, his conscience, to help those in need as well as those he loves, Jamie Burton is ready, at long last, to blast through obstacles as well as step around them, even if it involves risking his life and his fortune by helping agents on the Underground Railroad rescue "any others who get took" by slavecatchers. What's more, suppressing his "usual inhibitions" felt really good.

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