

THE LOST CAUSE

**By Michael Ventura
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Jack Jackson's *Lost Cause: The True Story of Famed Gunslinger John Wesley Hardin* is what they call a "graphic novel." Well, it's graphic enough -- without pictures, the 148-page story would shrink to maybe 25 pages, if that. But is it a novel? Or has Jackson abducted the word just because he has a story to tell and he can draw better than he can write? A novel presupposes character development; in fact, it presupposes characters -- not simply names attached to rudimentary behavior, which is all that *Lost Cause* offers. And could a novelist get away with Jackson's primitive sense of dialogue? *Lost Cause* expects us to credit speeches right out of those old Westerns that co-starred Gabby Hayes. Or he'll throw in the occasional sitcom shtick, as when young Wes Hardin proposes marriage to his Jane Bowen and Jackson has her respond, "I thought you'd never ask." There is a photograph of Jane Bowen in the jail-turned-museum in Gonzales, Texas: a face of fierce intensity and obvious intelligence. It's hard to imagine that face spewing cliches. (Has Jackson never seen the photograph? His Jane looks nothing like her.)

If you read first-hand accounts of the Old West (Hardin's memoir, the writings of Bat Masterson, the letters of Calamity Jane), they speak articulately, colorfully, with individual voices. In the tales of storytellers who knew the West firsthand (Mark Twain, Bret Hart, Stephen Crane, Jack London, Willa Cather, Zane Grey) you don't find much that sounds like Gabby Hayes and Hopalong Cassidy -- and these writers are the standards you invoke when you use the word "novel." *Lost Cause* can't ride in that company, so let's discard the term "graphic novel" for the pretension it is. It takes more than a label to create a novel.

Jackson's other and more damaging pretension is historical accuracy. On the back cover he's called "a scrupulous historian," but on page 13, in a scene set in 1857, his riders are armed with what look very like Winchester-style repeating rifles. You've seen them in lots of Westerns. Roughly the length of modern rifles, they could fire several bullets without reloading, by means of working the lever that served as the trigger-guard. But there were no such rifles in 1857. Until the Civil War ended in 1865, rifles were long-muzzled and had to be reloaded after each shot, which usually meant running a rod down the inside of the barrel. The rifles Jackson pictures on page 13 didn't come into wide use until the 1870s -- which, not coincidentally, is when the West really started opening up. (The Plains Indians held their own against single-shot weapons, but the new guns were one of the factors that doomed them.) The goof shakes your faith in Jackson's grasp of details.

Which is not to say that all Jackson's history is as shoddy. Given the many conflicting sources for the story he tells, and how hard it is to know whom to believe, much of Jackson's history is plausible. But "a scrupulous historian" must choose, on every page, between the always-contradictory accounts, and must give reasons for each choice -- depths beyond the reach of "a graphic novel." So we're better off judging *Lost Cause* not as a serious work of history, and certainly not as a novel, because Jackson doesn't live up to those standards any more than your average Hollywood screenwriter. *Lost Cause* is best judged on its own terms as a personal expression, based pretty much

(but not dependably) on fact. It's one man's outlook on a complex period of Texas history. This is not the West; it's Jackson's West. And he must take responsibility for it.

One thing he must take responsibility for is that the long subtitle flashing John Wesley Hardin's famous name is misleading. Hardin plays a comparatively minor role in this many-charactered story, one person among many in the anarchic Sutton-Taylor Feud.)

In telling a tale of the chaos that came upon Texas in the wake of the Civil War, Jackson is telling a brutal story of racism. This, of itself, does not make Jackson a racist. It is a legitimate, necessary subject. Texas was overwhelmingly pro-slavery (a fact that will always stain its flag), and the freeing of the slaves resulted in tragic behavior on all sides. Whites were inevitably bitter at having lost the war and being reduced, in effect, to an occupied country. Blacks rightfully demanded their full equality without further delay, and understandably (to put it mildly) sought revenge on those who'd been their oppressors. These tensions were exacerbated by gruesome people on all sides who exploited the chaos for personal power and profit. In fact, most people at the time tried to behave decently, within their all-too-human limits, but decent people rarely create stories juicy enough to tell a century later. Legends are rooted in excesses. In this era the excesses were vicious and Texas was drawn helplessly into an abyss so horrible that people still suffer from it.

Nor is Jackson a racist by dint of presenting the white protagonists as the violent racists they were. How else could they be presented? They talked like racists and behaved like racists, and to portray them in any other light would be ridiculous. I would also insist that Jackson's obvious sympathy for them is something he has a right to. As a white Texan they are his ancestors, he is their inheritor, and it is a risky business to have no empathy with the people from whom one has inherited one's world. If you can't find anything to admire in them, then it's hard to find anything to admire in yourself. Jackson's heroes have courage in the face of danger, fierceness, determination, flair, and a kind of flat-out pedal-to-the-metal madness that is very American and that, as an American who's loved as many bad movies as Jackson obviously has, I too can't help but empathize with.

Jackson is a racist because he finds these qualities only in white people. Almost without exception, he presents blacks as oafs -- exactly as blacks were presented in the old-timey movies that are the model for his dialogue. Amazingly, nearly every drawing of a black man is the same drawing. Same bone structure, same expression, same lips. His whites, by contrast, are differentiated. This is more than a simple gaffe. This is how Jackson sees. It's also a necessary function of his storytelling -- for if he drew blacks as humanly as he drew whites, then the racism of the whites would be harder for the reader to take.

In one passage, a contingent of black Federal cavalry with a warrant for Buck Taylor comes upon the Taylors at a family hoedown. The text reads: "It is an unfortunate circumstance that the black sergeant attached to this patrol has keen eyes and a loud mouth." ("Loud mouth" is emphasized by Jackson's lettering.) "Dere be dat' Buck Taylor!", the sergeant points. The sergeant is not holding a weapon. Taylor shoots him in cold blood. Jackson has minimized the killing in two ways: The sergeant's face is the same face of almost all Jackson's blacks, so he's not really a person, he's just black; and the "loud mouth" description, with its emphasized lettering, has made fun of the sergeant before he's shot. The impression isn't one of a human being doing his job as he sees fit and getting murdered for it; it's of an uppity loudmouth nigger who got what was coming to him. Jackson didn't have to tell it that way. He could have given us the same incident

with a humanized face and without the "loud mouth" crack, and it would not have been racist, it would have simply been what happened. It's not the story he's telling, but the way he's telling it, that is racist.

Again: The text of a panel reads: "Negro suffrage -- long considered a remote possibility by all white Texans -- is at last a reality." When Jackson's white characters use the words "Negro," "nigrah," and "nigger," that's legitimate storytelling, because that's the way these people spoke. But when, as narrator, Jackson uses "Negro," a word he must know that African-Americans have rejected as demeaning and would take as demeaning, that's Jackson talking, not his characters.

In this panel, there are two blacks in the foreground -- both with the same generic face -- at the voting table. The black election official tells the black voter, "Mark it rat der -- then come back in an hour and do it again!" "Then I gets my bottle?" the voter asks. There's nothing racist in writing dialogue in dialect, no matter what the politically correct crowd says. Both races speak in dialect in Jackson's work, and it's appropriate. Nor is there anything racist in documenting election fraud -- he shows election fraud on the part of the whites too. But with the whites Jackson is careful to show that there were many who were against such fraud. Yet this is all we see of black attitudes toward voting. Jackson gives the clear impression that this is how blacks took to their new and long-delayed franchise. Which is a lie. There is massive documentation that most freed slaves were deeply serious about their freedom -- many, so very many, died, murdered, as proof of their seriousness. To suggest otherwise, in a work touting itself as history, is disgusting.

Jack Jackson has fallen under the spell of his ancestors and his history. I'm not trying to soften my critique when I say my heart goes out to him. It is a terrible thing to be enthralled by your past so deeply that you echo its horror. It tells, more than anything else could, just how horrible that past is -- for it reaches out and molds us still. Jackson is not a major artist, but, with whatever flaws, he is an artist who attempts big subjects and clearly cares about history. As an artist myself I can only feel pain that, in trying to express and interpret that history, he has merely succeeded in duplicating it. That's the last thing any of us, white or black, needs.

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