



BRAVE ENEMIES

A Novel of the American Revolution

ROBERT MORGAN

Author of *Gap Creek*, a *New York Times* Bestseller

Editor's Choice

Becoming America

by Lori A. Davis Perry

I was the only one nearby who wasn't running around. The redcoat threw down his musket and held his hands up. I thought he was hoping to surrender. The cavalry was coming toward him, and I stepped forward to protect him from the sabers. Col. William Washington's men were hallooing and chopping at every Tory still standing. A man's head went flying and rolled on the ground like a musk melon.

So begins Robert Morgan's latest novel *Brave Enemies*. Set in South Carolina during the Revolutionary War, the story follows the surprising path of Josie Summers, a sixteen-year-old girl who eventually ends up disguised as a soldier fighting in the Battle of Cowpens.

Morgan's novel tackles the most human—and thus dangerous—aspects of civil war and revolution, the moments when power vacuums appear, social structures dissolve, and the most violent impulses toward chaos and disintegration manifest themselves through individuals, gangs, and even entire communities. These moments of transition from one state of existence to another leave individuals and communities terrifyingly vulnerable to the violence that always lurks beneath the surface of human societies, a violence normally restrained by the rule of law and the strictures of communal life. Rend the fabric of this restraint, and the brutality of violence begins to feed upon itself, threatening not only the present, but the future as well. As Morgan puts it, *"I wanted to portray a world going through such rapid change everyone is disoriented. It is a struggle for a new definition of society. It is the threshold of a new country and new world, emerging from the violence and hate."*

Morgan explores the vast possibilities of these moments at every level in his novel—political affiliations, family life, neighborhoods, villages, and even the landscape itself seem caught in a liminal state from which they can descend into endless blood feuds or emerge as a nascent political body with some hope for a better future. In the 1780s the colonies are neither liberated nor pacified. With violent gangs roaming at will and British regulars rounding up and executing any person viewed with suspicion, it is safe to be neither a Patriot nor a Tory, an agitator nor a pacifist. Houses are burned, women raped, entire families hanged together. The horrors of civil war emerge with frightful clarity in Morgan's tale, for there is no place to hide from seemingly inevitable brutality. As he puts it, *"As I did research on the Revolution in the Carolinas I was astonished at the*

violence of the times, and at what I called the 'moral ambiguity' of the times. I think it was hard for most people to decide which was the right side. Both Whigs and Tories did such horrendous things. . . . As I studied the Revolution in the South I discovered it was a civil war; neighbor against neighbor, brother against brother. It was hard to know what was right. Two brothers fought on opposite sides at Kings Mountain and killed each other.

But there are people who take to war and killing. Often these are men who have been failures at everything else in their lives. It is sometimes called 'the war lover' types, as in John Hersey's novel about the 8th Air Force. Grant was not really good at anything else. It is the ultimate form of being in control, to kill and be paid to kill, and be decorated to kill. I guess we are all killers just under the surface, and combat training is designed to bring that out." The joy of killing and the rampages of gleeful killers cast an eery chill over the novel, and reinforce the day-to-day terrors of war not only for soldiers, but for the many families, including women and children, who are inevitably victimized by it.

Morgan displays a special affinity for the topography of the region. It is a place he knows well from his boyhood. The land itself re-enacts the multi-layered metaphors played out by the characters, for in the 1780s it teeters ominously between wilderness and civilization, wild and tamed—the Indians who own it have retreated into the mountains and the settlers who will claim it have only begun the long struggle to domesticate it. Isolated neighbors are not yet villagers. Churchgoers are not yet solidified into real congregations, but simply meet briefly for services and then melt back into the forests. Attempts at constructing communities are met with frustration at every turn—even a barn raising is broken up by British soldiers who have outlawed group activities to prevent treasonous meetings. Nor is the land immune to violent destruction, as a raging forest fire reinforces the dangerous escape and unlikely survival of Morgan's protagonists.

Both of Morgan's characters are caught up in the chaos of this unsettled place and time, neither of them by choice. Josie Summers is a sixteen-year-old girl whose maturing figure brings out the worst in her lascivious stepfather. Adolescence is her first shocking experience of the dangerous violence that can surface during moments of change, and the delight in cruelty that human beings can bring to any situation. When her stepfather rapes her, she murders him with an ax and escapes in his clothes disguised as a young man, her first act of violence appearing as simple self-preservation and vengeance. Terrified of what she's done, and seeking to lose herself in the wilderness, Josie heads west into the mountains. She finds herself attending a church service led by John Stretham, a Methodist circuit preacher, who offers her a place to stay and trains her as his supposedly male assistant.

Josie's identity is in constant flux—no longer a girl and not yet an adult, she is neither the Josie she has always known nor the Joseph she pretends to be. In

this sense, Josie's life is a metaphor for the country itself, as it grows away from its past but has not yet determined its future. Caught in a state of transition, already guilty of murder and thus demonstrably capable of real violence, Josie struggles to establish a future with John Stretham defined by the best within them, rather than the worst. Her guilt over the murder strengthens her resolve to maintain control over herself despite the lawlessness that surrounds her.

Nor is John Stretham without demons, for he possesses a violent temper that threatens to overwhelm him during moments of stress and uncertainty. Yet Stretham is determined to exert control and self-discipline over himself for the sake of a higher purpose. "*In John Stretham*," Morgan writes, "*I wanted to create a character whose ambitions are very different from what is happening around him. He wants to bring a message of peace and hope, of fellowship and love to this rough backcountry torn by the rebellion. The dynamics of the novel are built on this contrast. He and Josie dream of a peaceful life in the mountains, a family, a future, an asylum from the madness around them.*" Deeply shaken by his discovery of Josie's true gender, and horrified at the effect of this discovery on his congregational mission, he must fight with all his will to control his own passions. How can he reconcile his highest purpose—spiritual leadership as a missionary—with the shocking reality of a woman living in his house without his knowledge? Worse yet, he realizes he is in love with Josie and wants her to remain, a situation which the lawlessness of the backcountry makes all the more tempting. It would be so easy to give in to his guilty desires. Stretham finds an uneasy solution to this paradoxical situation by secretly marrying Josie in a fireside ceremony.

All of this sets up the poetic structure of the novel by preparing the reader for the Battle of Cowpens, the defining moment not only of several individuals, but of the Revolutionary War itself. For Robert Morgan, as for his characters, the battle is a deeply personal experience: "*I grew up hearing stories of the Revolution as well as the Civil War. Three of my ancestors fought in the Revolution, and my dad, who was a great storyteller, loved to describe General Daniel Morgan's great victory over Bloody Tarleton at Cowpens January 17, 1781, and the Overmountain men killing Ferguson at Kings Mountain October 7, 1780. The Revolution ended in battles in the South and in Kentucky at the Blue Licks in August 1782.*" Cowpens is an important battle historically, for it turned the tide in the ground war. And once again, Josie Summers finds herself in the center of a historical moment while trying to maintain an identity as a man. In the guise of a young soldier, separated from John Stretham by British soldiers who burn their house and drag him away, Josie inadvertently becomes a rebel soldier in Morgan's army, facing down the British cavalry on a smoke-filled battlefield.

Morgan's description of the battle through Josie's eyes serves several purposes. "*I knew there were women dressed as men fighting in both the Revolution and*

the Civil War,” he writes. *“They fought for at least three reasons: to accompany their husbands, to look for their missing husbands, and to get revenge for the death of a husband, father, or other relative. But I chose Josie as my narrator because I wanted to see the war with a fresh eye. I wanted the story told by someone who has never been to war or studied war. The challenge was to convey the confusion, boredom, uncertainty of militia life, and disorientation in battle scenes without confusing or boring the reader. I worked to make those scenes seem authentic, but comprehensible.”* Josie, of course, does not fight for any of the reasons Morgan mentions. She fights because she is hungry and signing up can get her both food and an opportunity not to be hanged as a Tory. And her perspective on the battle provides not only a personal account of the battle, but a metaphor for the war itself.

General Morgan visits each militia group the night before the battle and explains that he needs them to fire two shots and fall back. “‘All I want from you is two shots,’ he said. ‘You don’t have to stand up to a cavalry charge or a bayonet charge. Shoot twice and retreat to the next line. Fire at the epaulets and stripes. Don’t waste your powder on privates. Two shots and fall back.’” Josie has been given a rifle—a significant shooting advantage, for the British were still using muskets which had a shorter range. Colonel Tarleton and his Dragoons had hoped to engage the Continentals before Morgan’s rifleman militia arrived, but he miscalculated and the riflemen were already waiting for him. In the first moments of the battle, Josie becomes overwhelmed by the sight of the British soldiers, forming in ranks, the dragoons charging with sabers and the infantry fanning out. Terrified, she struggles to aim and fire, with mixed results. She runs back as the British unleash a volley of bullets around her and walk out of the smoke fixing bayonets. Waiting for the British infantry to advance to their new line, the militia are outraged by the British bayoneting of a wounded soldier and fire prematurely. Josie loses her ramrod and panics as the militia try to reload for a second shot. “But all around me men started dropping back,” she recounts. “They saw just as I did there wasn’t time to reload before the bayonets reached us. . . . Our line began to crumble and melt back. Wasn’t anything could hold it firm before the coming bayonets.”

As Josie’s line breaks and begins to run, she finds herself surrounded by wounded and fleeing men. She walks backward away from the British bayonets, determined not to run and trying to reload. She fires into the advancing smoke, unable to aim and unaware of whether she has hit anyone. Despite her determination to do what’s expected of her, Josie becomes disoriented after she stumbles over a dead body. She has lost her sense of direction. She begins running, presumably in the right direction. Then she turns to see the Green Dragoons bearing down on her with sabers. As the Dragoons are diverted away from the fleeing militiamen by Colonel Washington’s cavalry, the men continue running. “I couldn’t tell where we were going, but everybody seemed to be running in the same direction.”

At this moment, when the battle threatens to turn into a British rout, officers try their best to turn them back but they keep running. Lt Joseph Hughes of the South Carolina militia leaps in their path, trying to turn them back. “‘Tarleton will ride you down and chop you to pieces,’ he shouted. ‘Your only hope is to turn and fight.’” He continues to berate them to no avail. But as suddenly as they had started to run, they stopped. “I don’t know what came over us,” Josie recounts. “It was a mystery, like everything else that day. Lieutenant Hughes hollered at us and pointed back toward the line. As soon as we got behind the pines the terrible panic went out of us. It all happened at once. We saw there was no use to run.”

The decisive moment of the battle, as Morgan recounts it, does not come when the militias hold the line, but when they return to the line after breaking and running. The mystery of their return to sanity in the midst of chaos is the mystery of the Revolution itself. Whose voice is it that penetrates their panic and how did that voice come to be in that place at that moment in the middle of a pivotal battle? What inner resources of self-control were summoned in that moment? In this small but momentous battle, the struggles of the war itself take place in the hearts and souls of each participant. Where does that “something” come from that allows Marlowe in *Heart of Darkness* to step back from the precipice into which Kurtz has tumbled? What is the mystery of self-control, leadership, higher purpose, or simple serendipity that kept the American Revolution from descending into the uncontrolled bloodbath of the French Revolution? Certainly the same impulses rose to the surface in both places—blood lust, the will to power, the desire to use lawlessness for one’s own ends and purposes, as well as altruistic and progressive motives. What voice can penetrate fear and self-preservation? What kind of leadership can order such chaos? The mystery of the American Revolution itself, and the leadership that somehow—against all odds—wrenched it back from the abyss of lawless banditry comes to life in Morgan’s account of the Battle of Cowpens. Josie cannot run from the destruction of the Dragoons, no more than she could outrun the forest fire in which she and John become trapped. In the final moments of the battle, as in the forest fire, self-sacrifice is the only option for survival. It is the survival of others, rather than themselves, that propel Josie and John to heroic action.

Although Josie and John end up on opposite sides of the battlefield, fighting their battles in apparently opposite ways, they represent the same impulse toward creating order out of chaos, channeling—through the force of their own wills—the potential violence of human experience into something more—something better than simple survival, with a higher goal driving them to an awareness of their situation that many of their companions never grasp. In both cases, their final hope is for peace, not war.

“*While we are all potential killers,*” Morgan writes, “*given the right conditions, most of us are potential pacifists also. Amid the horrors of war it*

is only natural to decide such bloodshed is meaningless. Many soldiers express that sense of carnage as waste, a meaningless sacrifice. The justification of war is seen better from the outside, or in the aftermath.” Certainly John Stretham’s experiences confirm his disgust toward war in all forms. And from the perspective of the participants, the battle like the war itself is both baffling and terrifying. Yet the mystery of the voice in the wilderness lingers hauntingly over the novel, infusing Morgan’s tale with poetic pathos that transcends the lives of two people, the horrors of war, and the impact of the Battle of Cowpens. At its heart, the novel is about the human heart, and the mysterious power of the will in the face of shocking brutality and violence. Though one may believe less in the efficacy of war at the end of Morgan’s novel, no reader can fail to believe more in the resiliency of the human heart.

Robert Morgan is the author of seven previous books of fiction including *The Truest Pleasure* and the award-winning bestseller *Gap Creek*. He was raised on his family’s farm in the North Carolina mountains and now lives in Ithaca, New York, where he teaches at Cornell University.

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