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David Greene

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Field hand Jimmy meets Cato, a house servant from a nearby plantation. Jimmy, who despises whites, mistakes Cato for a white man. But soon he learns that Cato is only half white. Cato is the illegitimate son of plantation owner Augustus Askew. With time, Jimmy's fascination with Cato grows into romantic love.

Unmentionables is also the story of Dorothy Holland, whose parents own Jimmy. Dorothy does not want any man to control her life. When she falls in love with Cato's half-brother, William Askew, she must persuade him to agree to her terms, and to betray his role as a Confederate army officer.

On June 25th, 2011, Unmentionables was awarded the bronze medal for Gay and Lesbian fiction at the Book of the Year awards at the American Library Association conference in New Orleans.

This is Book one in the two book series.

...."Think Gone with the Wind meets Brokeback Mountain, one of the best novels of the year for any grown-up." --Kindle Nation Daily....

... "Surpasses the majority of Civil War novels by bringing together two enthralling love stories. Superb historical fiction with a contemporary angle; an enlightening look at the hidden elements of our past." --ForeWord Clarion Review

Unmentionables Details

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Author : David Greene

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From Reader Review Unmentionables for online ebook

Lydia says

Goodreads/Amazon gave "Unmentionables" to certain individuals on the basis that they read and then critique the book. I am not one of those persons.

Set against the backdrop of plantation life and the Civil War, the book is the story of two young black (slave) homosexual lovers and their desire to be together in spite of living on separate plantations.

Cato and Jimmy meet at a church service during the which a black slave minister is preaching forgiveness for Augustus Askew for the selling of two children of one his slaves. They are attracted to each other, but not fully understanding the reasons or implication . Cato, being a mulatto, has a different slave experience than his friend Jimmy, who is of darker hue. Through a Philadelphia Quaker named Erastus Hicks, Cato is exposed to some of the finer things in life, such as reading and art. It is Hicks who arouses Cato's intellectual desires and his sexual curiosity. Jimmy is a field slave.

Also in this backdrop is the relationship of Dorothy Holland and William Askew, the children of the two plantation owners. They attempt to maintain their relationship through the backdrop of the William's enlistment in the army of the Confederacy and the subsequent capture during the Civil War.

The characters are rather straightforward: the headstrong, clever Dorothy Holland; the college-educated, but weak-willed William; the beautiful and soft Cato; the strong-willed volatile and virile Jimmy; the rich, educated, artistic and predatory Erastus Hicks.

This book does nothing to address the moral implications of homosexuality or whether the two slaves knew enough to consider it. Cato and Jimmy are left to their primal instincts. Cato, it seems as never experienced the touch of a woman and Jimmy has only gotten hugs from his Mother and sister. It reads as though in addition to being exploited for their labor, the young males were also being sexually exploited, especially Cato.

Ariel Uppstrom says

This book was very interesting. It followed the stories of two plantations and the interactions between them. Two love stories are told with the backdrop of the Civil War. One is of an independent minded young woman and a somewhat timid man. The other is of two gay slaves whose friendship blossoms into a romance. As the individuals seek to find a place where they can each be accepted and live freely, the Civil War and all its social influence plays into their lives.

The majority of the book was very good. I enjoyed how the characters were developed, how they interacted with each other and how they ended up being related in one way or another. I was impressed with the author's ability to capture the love affairs in equal terms. Frequently, straight novels focus too much on straight people and gay novels focus too much on gay couples, but this one was able to acknowledge that both exist in the same realm. I also liked watching as each person discovered how they felt about slavery and the war. With that being said, I did not like the last part of the book when many of the characters found themselves in the North. Suddenly things got overly perfect. People's ingrained ideas were suddenly changed, everyone was pretty happy at the end and then it was suddenly over! It was very frustrating. I felt that there was way too much exposition and then no falling action after the "climax". Overall, I would say it was a pleasant book, but the end was a letdown.

James Vilorio says

Unmentionables by David Greene is set in the American Civil War south and recounts the intertwining stories of two couples, Jimmy and Cato, who are gay, black, and enslaved, and Dorothy and William, who are straight, white, and wealthy. If this time period and subject matter seem a tad too distant to relate to your present 21st century lives, fret not. History in this work is used masterfully to transform the specific into the universal. Unmentionables is about love - romantic and otherwise.

Take for instance a conversation that Cato has with Erastus Hicks, a traveling painter from Pennsylvania who arrives at the Tennessee property of Augustus Askew, the slave's master, to paint a portrait of Lucille, Augustus's wife. Cato is engaged to assist Erastus on his commission. When he asks the artist why he paints, Erastus replies:

"It has something to do with yearning...yearning to get hold of what I see. Sometimes I'm overcome, Cato, truly...When I look at this world and see it, I wonder if what I see...is this what others see too?...Because I think if others saw it as I did, they too would be compelled to take up paints and brushes-to try to rope the magnificence of this world onto a canvas...just to try to get hold of it..."

Erastus is later implicated in the romance of William Askew (the son of Augustus and Lucille) and Dorothy (whose parents own Jimmy, Cato's eventual love interest). Erastus's acute perception of the world recurs throughout the novel and seems to mirror that of the book's author, David Greene, who writes with exceptional insight about both the human and non-human condition. In the following excerpt, for example, Mr. Greene provides a wonderful description of how the character named Venus, who happens to be a dog, looks upon her two-legged, upright friends:

"Then again, all humans were at a disadvantage. Walking as they did with their noses so high up off the ground, one could hardly expect them to catch most of the essence of the world. For what was the earth if not a sniffable, whiffable, smorgasbord? The world was a bouquet of fumes and traces, redolent, spicy, sometimes sweet or savory, sometimes foul or fetid. There were stinks of rot-and there were lovely perfumes. There were damp smells like creek water, or wet grass, or spring mud. There were dry smells like hay in the hot sun, or the grainy, dusty smell of weeds, browned and dessicated from days without water. There were exciting erotic smells of urine, sweat and body aromas: those powerful, heady wafts that brought the atoms of one body into the nose of another. How could humans not read these sexual signatures, the intimate imprint, the very particular smell of each being, traveling like a cloud of emissions, the fumes of physicality, dragged in a trail of musk behind all creatures?"

Mr. Greene's great appreciation of all that is sensual is equaled by his intellectual understanding of relationships that cross established racial, social, sexual, and political boundaries. In a style that is straightforward without being encyclopedic, poetic without being over-embellished, and informative without being didactic, he achieves that balance of form and content required for a successful, and, in this case, beautiful work of art. When Erastus explains to Dorothy why he has chosen his itinerant lifestyle, he states:

"As I said before, so much that is beautiful in life happens in an instant. But one must contrive to be in the right place at the right time and have one's eyes open."

For me, one of those instants began when I received my copy of *Unmentionables*.

Jacqueline says

I barely managed to get a few pages into this book before I set it aside. It felt like the author was trying to hard to make both his love stories fit into one book when he should have just been focusing on one. Not only that but I felt the plot was a bit too thin to be believable.

I also felt like the male/male romance could have been replaced with a male/female romance without any plot changes because I never got to know the characters well enough to care about their HEA. Overall though what could have been an interesting book just turned out to be one big meh for me.

I received this book as a digital ARC from NetGalley but the opinions in the review are my own.

Christopher Moss says

REVIEW by Christopher Hawthorne Moss

An astonishing look at an unusual family in the Civil War period. The Hollands and the Askews, white planters and their slaves, watch as the turmoil preceding the war turns their lives upside down. Dorothy, the daughter of one family, is fiercely independent, while Cato, who is both the slave and son of the wealthier planter, lives in between the two worlds. William, his half brother, and Dorothy have a rocky engagement beset with the bride's anti-war, anti-slavery sentiments, while Cato, attracted to the fiercely anti-white field hand Jimmy, are the two love stories that bind this novel. It is remarkable how many of the cast of this novel have their values challenged by exposure to the artist, Erastus Hicks, a Quaker who encourages both Cato and Dorothy's independence. Teaching Cato to read, he is the author ultimately of the beating that causes both Cato and his lover, the field hand Jimmy, to run away. At the same time Hicks encourages Dorothy's independence, her growing anti-slavery and pacifist positions, which, in a slightly convoluted way, causes her fiancé William to be captured by Union soldiers and sent to a prison in Chicago, where Dorothy heads in hope of freeing William..

Greene has a fascinating writing style, skipping between characters including the two dogs, Venus and

Scout, to show yet another perspective on just how simple and how complex they live their lives. One must conclude in fine that the artist is the one with the most conflict, his attraction to Cato influencing him to lend his support to the runaways. The power of sex and family loyalty mix in disparate characters and settings to lead all to disrupt the expected drives of the characters. The wealthier planter, Askew, and his lust for a slave creates Cato. Dorothy and William are overwhelmed by their attraction to each other. Hicks is drawn sexually to Cato which leads him to teach him to read, and Jimmy overcomes his rage against whites to bond with Cato. The family loyalty is at the heart of everyone's ability to accept the runaways in the final analysis: Askew able to accept Cato when he sees the young man accepts Cato as his brother, William's decision to stay north of the Ohio River when both Askew and Dorothy join him, and most notably Ella's being able to step away from Jimmy to support Dorothy and her marriage to William.

There were a couple things that puzzled me about this book, and I have no doubt someone will explain these to me. One is the title, UNMENTIONABLES. Surely this word is intended to signify more than just a slang term for underwear which doesn't even appear in the book until well past the halfway point. I will have to forego the other puzzling occurrence to avoid a huge spoiler. This is an intelligent book, though not, as the blurb describes it, the only book about African American gay lovers. There are others, though arguably few and far between. The literary critics must simply be overlooking the GLBTQ romance publishers and their books. But if this book is the entrée of readers into the broader genre, so much the better.

Proofed by one Love Editing.

Jennifer says

The premise and everything is what drew me to enter my name to win this book. Homosexuality in the 1800s or anything in the 1800s is rife with drama and intensity and I was eager to see how this played out.

Unfortunately there were a lot of issues I had with this book and was unable to finish getting a little less than 50% way through. It took me a while to even revisit this and I ended up skipping ahead to find out what happens to characters.

I really admire the authors want of tackling a subject that I'm sure did happen and has been written about vaguely if at all. But as a fan of Zora Neale Hurston who is KNOWN for using dialect the dialogue and voices in this piece did not ring true for the 1800s. Jimmy sounded like Cato and vice versa which doesn't make sense for a field hand and a house negro. Dolen Perkins-Valdez did a great job in her debut novel "Wench" of capturing the complexity of a slave master relationship and even slave-slave relationships at a very tense time.

There were WAY too many POVs and having one from the dog really dragged the piece rather than push it forward. Too many characters and too many convenient situations. I felt like I wasn't in the 1800s but kind of in a sort of 1800s that we should be able to fill in the blanks on. Too much flowery language when moments could've been gotten to the point making the overall book come in at much less than 500+ pages.

I think a serious edit would've helped this flow much better and also to bring more realism and complexity to the situations and characters and making the entire piece seem more true for the reader.

Jim says

I have shelves and shelves of historical novels. My favorite genre. I especially have focused on the history of America. The American revolution and the Civil War two of my favorites eras.

I have discovered other books allusions to character same gender attractions. Most however are rather vague and approach the topic as a side note with very little character development or attention to the struggles of those who find themselves members of this group of mankind. It was especially pleasing to read a story that focused on these people as main characters rather than as side notes. The character development the author utilizes here was refreshing and to my mind held true to what I would suppose to be the actuality of how things would naturally occur. Especially in the time period of the Civil War.

If you are offended by alternative lifestyles this book is probably not for you, but if you have an open mind or are of similar disposition as these characters then you will enjoy this story as much as I did. I found some of the most endearing characters I have ever encountered in a historical novel.

The careful incorporation of spirituality was also very well developed and lent an especial endearing quality I enjoyed.

I recommend this book without hesitation.

Christopher Moss says

UNMENTIONABLES is an epic story of two pairs of lovers in the Civil War south. One couple is straight, white, and wealthy. The other couple is gay, black, and enslaved.

Their fates are intertwined in ways that none of them could have imagined.

Jimmy, a field hand, meets Cato, a house servant from a nearby plantation. At first, Jimmy, who despises whites, mistakes Cato for a white man but soon discovers that Cato is both a slave and the illegitimate son of the plantation owner Augustus Askew. As they become acquainted, Jimmy's fascination with Cato grows into romantic love.

UNMENTIONABLES is also the story of Dorothy Holland, whose parents own Jimmy and his sister, Ella. Dorothy does not want any man to control her life, or to prevent her from granting freedom to Ella, her lifelong friend. When Dorothy falls in love with Cato's white half brother, William Askew, she must persuade him to agree to her terms—and betray his role as a Confederate army officer.

Now a Book of the Year award winner! (Gay literary fiction / Gay historical fiction) A landmark in gay black fiction, UNMENTIONABLES tells the story that was never told before, the story of gay African American slaves.

REVIEW by Christopher Hawthorne Moss

An astonishing look at an unusual family in the Civil War period. The Hollands and the Askews, white planters and their slaves, watch as the turmoil preceding the war turns their lives upside down. Dorothy, the daughter of one family, is fiercely independent, while Cato, who is both the slave and son of the wealthier planter, lives in between the two worlds. William, his half brother, and Dorothy have a rocky engagement beset with the bride's anti-war, anti-slavery sentiments, while Cato, attracted to the fiercely anti-white field

hand Jimmy, are the two love stories that bind this novel. It is remarkable how many of the cast of this novel have their values challenged by exposure to the artist, Erastus Hicks, a Quaker who encourages both Cato and Dorothy's independence. Teaching Cato to read, he is the author ultimately of the beating that causes both Cato and his lover, the field hand Jimmy, to run away. At the same time Hicks encourages Dorothy's independence, her growing anti-slavery and pacifist positions, which, in a slightly convoluted way, causes her fiancé William to be captured by Union soldiers and sent to a prison in Chicago, where Dorothy heads in hope of freeing William..

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Nicendavy says

"Unmentionables" is simply the best new novel I have read in at least a decade. It should be read by all who may be interested in how gay people survive in a deeply conservative America. It is an intimate narrative of individuals, couples and families before and during the American Civil War, mixing gay and straight love stories with the grand historical sweep of those times. Wonderful characters emerge, such as Cato, the half-black, delicately handsome young son of a severe plantation owner whom his father refuses to acknowledge as his own; Jimmy, the slave who sets out to right wrongs; and Dorothy, the Southern girl who defies the South's entire social structure. Scenes of erotic beauty are matched by others of moral challenge. The prose is straightforward, lavish, elegant, and it includes Tolstoyan tours de force such as one amazing chapter seen from the point of view of a beloved canine pet. Read it!

Laura Cushing says

I enjoyed this book on many levels. First, it was nice to find a book with romance involved that didn't make it the entire focus of the book. The characters involved in love affairs have depth and development outside

their entanglements. There is a solid plot that keeps the reader interested throughout. I like the diversity of the characters too - there are heterosexual, homosexual, and asexual characters. There are complex race relations- some characters are slaves, one is half-white, in the slavery south. There are characters who believe in god, and characters who are atheists. I loved all that.

The end left me wanting to know more about what happened with the characters, which is always the sign of a good book. I found myself speculating what they would all do after the Civil War was over.

The only reason I give this book four stars instead of five is there were a few points that detracted from the story. Some of the character voices were hard to distinguish from each other. I think that in some places the dialogue could have been more authentic to each character's station and place in life. I also found myself wondering why certain characters got the beliefs they held. Dorothy, a plantation owner's daughter, was an abolitionist for example. The book shows that she has a close friendship with her slave Ella, and then when she meets the Quaker painter Erastus, she has even more strong feelings toward equality for all. But what started her on that path?

Still this wasn't enough to detract from an overall good book. Would definitely read more by this author.

Teresa Page says

Hmmm....oh wow

First let me say this book is NOT filled with gay erotica. There are two scenes of homosexual sex, which I skipped over, and one scene of fornication between two heterosexuals that was NOT explicit. The book hardly used the N word which was quite refreshing. I have read so many historical fiction books that I felt that word was quite overused. This author managed to tell the story Without having to use that word 2000 times but still got the Point across. Without giving away too much I barely could stand Jimmy he was an arrogant, ungrateful and well ignorant man. He proved the fact one should never judge by a man's skin or plight in life of one's ignorance. I did not want Cato to be with him! I was quite fond of Erastus and wanted Cato to choose him if that was the lifestyle he chose to live. Dorothy and Ella and Sammy and Venus and Scout(the canines) I grew very attached to. I was so happy the decision Ella made at the end. I want to say so much more but I do not want to give away spoilers. I am now going on to book two of this series that I'm sure is going to be verrrry interesting.

Elli says

It was OK. It focused on two families pre-civil war plantations in the south. Characters were well introduced and followed through. For me sexual details were too heavily focused in relation to the story line although some might like this in a story makeup. Realizing that one is homosexually inclined and trying to follow through with the lifestyle is one of the issues. And in that period. Also a heroine who very much disagreed with slavery, women's rights and position in society, and could be quite flagrant with whom and where she expressed her opinions...right up and into the secession of the southern states. Her various sexual affairs were too often and too vividly described for what I would call tasteful, although again, some might like this. The end was almost too idealistically good. Somehow the general overall effect was more like a soap opera than an in-depth story.

Dayna Ingram says

This is an ambitious novel that unfortunately did not succeed in all areas, but what a valiant effort. I chose to read this because I don't normally read historical fiction/period pieces and with the queer twist (a gay male couple are main characters) it sounded like something I'd never read before. I enjoyed reading about the relationships of the characters and following them through sort of their coming-of-age, but I would have liked the camera to pull back a little more, so to speak. The story was focused entirely on these people and told mostly through their dialogue (at times an engaging technique, at times simply tedious) that I grew kind of tired (the book is 500+ pages) and really wanted more of the historical background and, I don't know, just more atmospheric stuff. But it was well-done, overall.

I got this novel through the Goodreads First Reads program. (an awesome program, btw!)

Nile Princess says

Holding at five stars on the re-read. One of the best books I've ever read. Off to Book 2!

This book made me cry like every third chapter, right up until the end; tears of sadness and joy. Beautifully written. Review to follow.

Bambi Unbridled says

This was a nice leisurely historical fiction. It was not something that I would normally pick up given the description was "gone with the wind meets brokeback mountain." However, I was glad I didn't judge a book by its cover. The story did not solely focus on the two male slaves who were in love, but it was very descriptive and followed all the characters. I could see it turn into a made-for-tv movie. I would have liked to see more about the love story between the male and female lead who were in love. While it was not a gripping page turner, this is a nice book to intersperse into your reading if you are into reading more than one book at once.
