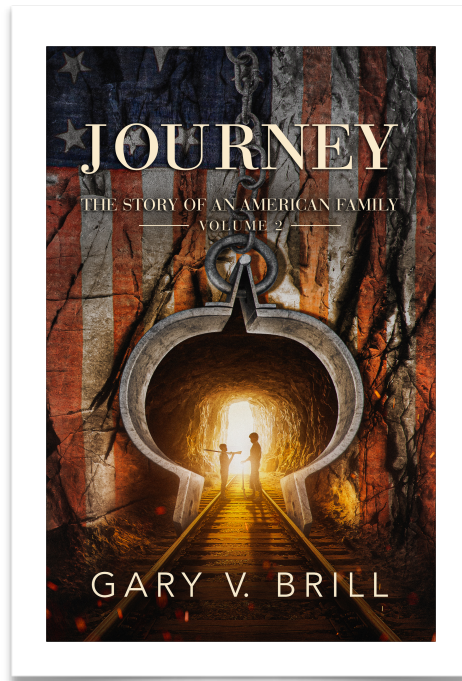




“Book Review: *Journey (Volume 2)*”

Reviewed by Tucker Lieberman



Heroism on the harrowing path of the Underground Railroad

Gary V. Brill’s second novel in the *Journey* series features characters who bravely fight the injustice of slavery at great risk to themselves. It sensitively reveals the hard work that people put into defending what they know as right, especially in the 19th century when the woods are vast, communication is slow, and part of what they are fighting over is the law itself.



The first volume began in 1814 and followed the life of a free-born Black farmer, James Woodman, who has a family and owns land in Pennsylvania. James confronts and fights racism, and he feels strongly about remaining on his family farm, but he is persecuted.

Meanwhile, throughout the mid-1800s, slavery is increasingly politically contested between American states, with attempted compromises in legislation ***“as if there could even be two sides to this hellish argument,”*** and with people siding for and against Abraham Lincoln. An individual may move or escape to a free state, but even then the political problem remains inescapable for them, since slave states demand the return of “fugitive slaves,” and slave hunters kidnap and kill Black people without much attention to what any state law says about any particular individual.

This second volume opens with James teaching freed people to read and write at Fort Malden in Ontario. The northward trip had taken him a month. He had traveled with a white girl who was raised by Quakers; though it was dangerous for them to be seen together, they defended each other. James stayed in Canada several years until receiving a letter informing him of family illnesses. It’s 1856 when he goes home to Adams County, Pennsylvania, in the Gettysburg area, where he’d once co-founded the Adams County Anti-Slavery Society, a room in a mill that still ***“held so much history and hope.”***

The farm has its own sense of time: ***“You did what needed to be done by watching the sky, feeling the air, measuring rainfall and a million other signs that only those who lived within nature could read. A farmer feels he is of the farm, a part of it as much as the soil and the sun.”*** On another level, incendiary political events drive their own kind of narrative. People experience time in that way, too.

The novel spans a tumultuous decade. ***“The doors at the back of the church suddenly flew open with a bang,”*** and there’s the messenger ***“holding a newspaper aloft,”*** announcing the secession of South Carolina in 1860, contributing to sparking the Civil War.

In this fictional tale of people who escape to freedom, what stands out is the length of the journey. When someone is on the run through farmland and woods, it’s hard for them to know where they’re going. They navigate by constellations. ***“Jonathan knew,”*** for ex-



ample, ***“that if he continued uphill and kept the Drinking Gourd off his shoulder they should come out near the road at the top.”*** The novel asks us to imagine what happens if one is accompanying a child, or if one is wounded and can’t seek medical assistance because of who they are or what they’ve done.

Also, the Underground Railroad is more of a battle than a ride. If someone is taking this route, they must categorize everyone they meet as either friend or mortal enemy. They may have to shoot someone. Or ten people. At least in this tale, enemies tend to identify themselves as such, and it is helpful that they do so, but then the traveler has to decide what to do with them.

It’s not that violence is inherently desirable for the action or adrenaline. It’s that it seems inevitable to protect the young and defenseless and the quiet, gentle aspects of farm life. People who volunteer themselves or their homes for the Underground Railroad risk their lives and property. Holding a baby gives sudden clarity: ***“He knew why The Road was so important. He knew why fighting for freedom for his people was worth it.”*** Family will always be cherished. That means people on the Underground Railroad have to stop would-be kidnappers and murderers and not feel a lot of grief or guilt over how they do it. ***“There is no reasoning with people like that,”*** but only asking oneself which is the most prudent course of action: fight or flight?

As in the first book, slave-hunters use the “n-word.” The white people never say this in a casual way; it always signals their belief in a rigid social hierarchy and a readiness for extreme violence.

The second volume of *Journey* organically brings up important events from this decade in U.S. history. Brill imagines what it might have been like to live then, not as someone who had the luxury to observe and reflect but as someone who had to fight for survival. This is a complex and empathetic imagining of how one fictional family endured the war and helped change the outcome for others.