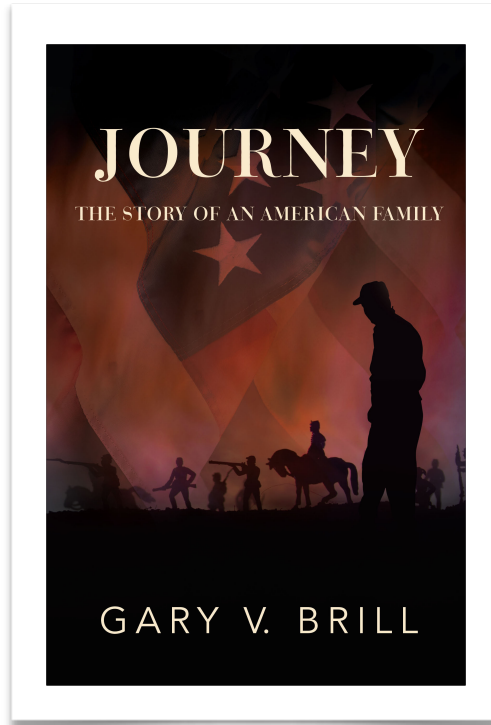




Book Review: *Journey*

Reviewed by Tucker Lieberman



In this heartbreaking family story, a tenacious man helps the Underground Railroad

Gary V. Brill's historical novel *Journey: The Story of an American Family* follows the Woodmans, a Black family in Pennsylvania. The War of 1812 has ended, and the local militia are no longer fighting the British.

James Woodman is the strong character at the center of this story. He isn't enslaved, but nonetheless he is less than free in Pennsylvania.



It's important to learn about how different people experienced this American era. This fictional tale is profoundly informed by that history. Brill deftly reveals how the character James is emotionally attached to his family farm and yet is inspired by dreams of border-crossing, with all the implied promise of freedom.

The scenes of his life that comprise the novel are unrelentingly violent. In the novel's opening, a constable knocks him down and says: ***"You know your type is not allowed on our streets after dark..."*** This characterizes many of his interactions throughout the novel. He faces—and uses—fists, knives, rifles. There are kidnapped children and repeated threats of lynching. Hostile strangers demand a horse and kill a pet cat. James doesn't shrink from responding to violence with the force necessary for his survival, and he continually lands in such danger, partly due to his commitment to helping formerly enslaved people escape to freedom.

Though James does meet white Quakers who assist with the Underground Railroad, most white characters in this story are execrable. James knows that if he fights them and leaves any alive to tell the tale, it may haunt him forever.

The novel follows the Woodman family for years, as well as James's friend Luke, a man who escaped slavery. The characters' life stories are layered and detailed. James purchases the freedom of Abigail from her enslaver, Francis Scott Key (yes, the one famous for writing the lyrics to the "Star-Spangled Banner"), and James and Abigail marry. We watch the children grow up. In 1830, James and Abigail's children Jonathan, Francis, and little Abbie are between the ages of seven and fourteen, and Luke and his wife Anna live nearby.

Abigail is willing to see her former "master," Key, again. Her feelings are complex. ***"I truly wish we lived in a more simple world, a place where right and wrong were always obvious,"*** she explains to one of her children. ***"But we do not."***



In other respects, the narrative can be emotionally curt. When the matriarch fades away on the farm, James is said to be ***“bereft and unable to think clearly,”*** but the story cuts to a few months later when the snow has disappeared and it is ***“time to get back to work.”***

The novel educates about the changing political situation in a place and time where the legal status of slavery was in flux. Some states were voluntarily abolishing slavery, but not without intense political fights. ***“Governor Ritner had come out as an abolitionist and praised Pennsylvania for starting to outlaw slavery in his annual message to the State Legislature,”*** Brill writes, but the progress could be slow and incremental and wasn’t guaranteed to hold.

It should be mentioned that, in characters’ spoken interactions, white men frequently use the “n-word” to intimidate and discredit Black people. The slavers, including hunters of runaways, don’t always know or care about a Black person’s status under the law, and their use of a racial slur reinforces and communicates their worldview. They are prepared to continue enslaving, or to begin enslaving, any Black person. This is potentially educational for readers who aren’t already aware of the historical link between racial slurs and physical violence. *Journey* makes this connection abundantly clear. The racist characters speak entirely differently from the abolitionists. However, readers who are already aware of the era’s physical and verbal violence may simply be overwhelmed by its intensity.

In the scenes that give respite from the violence, readers can immerse themselves in the scene on the farm: ***“the water jug down on the wagon floor,”*** potatoes, squash, apple butter, ham from the last hog. It’s a landscape that demands hard work and is never empty of memories and risk. *Journey* shines here.

This novel raises important questions about identity and freedom. We often think of freedom as a description of what we truly already are, have, and deserve—and, in that symbolic sense, as something we can never lose. Other times, some of us need to physically fight those who try to take our freedom away. In *Journey*, both are true.