

Simon The Fiddler, by Paulette Jiles

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

Paulette Jiles' western novel *News of the World* was a National Book Award finalist as well as a book group favorite. *Simon the Fiddler*, her subsequent book, is a prequel of *News of the World*. Simon Boudlin, a minor character in the previous book, is the new story's protagonist.

Simon the Fiddler begins in the waning months of the Civil War. An itinerant fiddler from Kentucky, Simon traveled around the southwest, playing his prized violin. Slight in stature and appearing younger than his 23 years, Simon eluded conscription until a barroom fight in Texas landed him in a Confederate unit along the Rio Grande. Simon became part of the regimental band: "His fiddle was all he had against a chaotic world, and the mindlessness of a losing war, against corruption, thievery, cowardice, cactus, gunsmoke, and hominy."

In May 1865, a month after General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox, the Confederate troops in Simon's garrison finally conceded that the war was lost. To mark the occasion, war-weary Union and Confederate officers held a formal dinner at Fort Brown officers' mess. For the guests' entertainment, a band was assembled with troops from both sides, including Simon with his fiddle.

As the officers and their families gathered for the celebratory dinner, Simon noticed Doris Dillion, a young woman with "an expression of deep attention, an intelligent face, black hair, and dark blue eyes," sitting with the pretentious Union Colonel Webb and his family. Simon learns that Doris is their daughter's Irish governess. Although their interaction is brief, the pair are mutually attracted.

When Colonel Webb is posted to San Antonio, Doris, an indentured servant with a three-year contract, is committed to journey there with the Webb family. Simon, a man with few resources, sets out with his rag-tag band, now "servants of music and not of the state," striving to make enough money to purchase land so that he can marry Doris. On his quest, he encounters outlaws, Indian skirmishes, and natural disasters.

Doris, as she waits for Simon, "thinks about the fiddler repeatedly, as if he too were part of the landscape, with his dusty red hair and his worn clothes the color of earth. He was a man of a defeated army and at dinner he had played his heart out in a borrowed shirt. Very much like the Irish."

Paulette Jiles is often compared to another Texan novelist, the great Larry McMurtry. Beautifully written, *Simon the Fiddler* abounds with vivid scenes depicting life in the wild west. Its essence, however, is a tender romantic tale of true grit and determination.

(Note: *Simon the Fiddler* is part of the Heritage Hills Library and Somers Library collections. For a list of new books at the Heritage Hills Library, please see page 9.)