

Chenneville, by Paulette Jiles

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

Paulette Jiles' bestselling novel *News of the World* is beloved by book groups everywhere. *News of the World* centers on the tender bond forged between a veteran Army captain and an orphaned girl during their perilous journey in 1870s Texas. In her new novel *Chenneville*, Ms. Jiles revisits the rugged western landscape of the Reconstruction period.

Chenneville begins in September 1865 at a northern Virginia field hospital. Injured in a barge explosion, Union First Lieutenant John Chenneville had suffered a head wound and spent months in a half-conscious state. While John recuperated, "Lee had surrendered, Lincoln had been assassinated, and the great Union Army had gone home. The war was over."

Upon his discharge, John travelled up the Missouri River valley to Temps Clair, the plantation built by his French ancestors. Arriving home, John was dismayed to see "the gardens had gone to jungle and apple orchards left unpruned." Terrible news awaited John at Temps Clair: His younger sister Lalie, her Confederate husband, and their child inexplicably had been murdered while John was away. The suspected killer is a rogue deputy, A. J. Dodd, now on the run with San Antonio as his apparent destination. Despite his uncle's admonition not to seek vengeance, John is determined to hunt down his family's killer.

Traveling on horseback, John tracked Dodd through Keota Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). When a rare blizzard blew in, John sought shelter at a remote Western Union outpost. Inside the cabin was a lone telegraph operator, Aubrey Robertson, who offered to contact telegraph agents across Texas for information about Dodd's whereabouts. Virginia Reavis, whose code name was Belle, was Western Union's only female telegraph agent.

While John continued his pursuit of Dodd, however, a telegraph operator was murdered. Federal Marshal Giddens, erroneously targeting John, issued an arrest warrant: "John Chenneville was a wanted man, a man gently reared in a pleasant old French village north of St. Louis, a person of some education, a gentleman farmer of many acres. Now he was a fugitive in a strange land owning nothing but what he carried with him and the last of his family. So he went on."

Paulette Jiles, who lives on a ranch near San Antonio, often is compared to the late Texan writer Larry McMurtry, author of *Lonesome Dove*. A rousing, atmospheric tale of the American frontier, *Chenneville* is a fine example of western literature at its best.