



Neverhome

Laird Hunt

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An extraordinary novel about a wife who disguises herself as a man and goes off to fight in the Civil War.

She calls herself Ash, but that's not her real name. She is a farmer's faithful wife, but she has left her husband to don the uniform of a Union soldier in the Civil War. NEVERHOME tells the harrowing story of Ash Thompson during the battle for the South. Through bloodshed and hysteria and heartbreak, she becomes a hero, a folk legend, a madwoman and a traitor to the American cause.

Laird Hunt's dazzling new novel throws a light on the adventurous women who chose to fight instead of stay behind. It is also a mystery story: why did Ash leave and her husband stay? Why can she not return? What will she have to go through to make it back home?

In gorgeous prose, Hunt's rebellious young heroine fights her way through history, and back home to her husband, and finally into our hearts.

Neverhome Details

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Author : Laird Hunt

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From Reader Review Neverhome for online ebook

Scott Rhee says

I'm not sure if Laird Hunt's novel "Neverhome" is actually based on a true story, but it is well-documented that many women fought during the Civil War, disguising themselves as men. Such is the case with the protagonist of Hunt's novel, Constance Thompson, a wife of a farmer who feels the need to go off to war, while her husband, Bartholomew, stays at home because of a disability that makes him unable to fight. She dons the blue uniform, dubs herself Ash Thompson, and heads off to battle.

Hunt's novel is a modern re-telling and re-imagining of Homer's "The Odyssey". It posits the "what-if" scenario of Penelope going off to Troy, fighting bravely, and attempting to return home to her husband Odysseus. Along the way, of course, is every sort of obstacle keeping her from her goal.

My only complaint with Hunt's novel is that it is too short. The prose is beautiful, the chapters are brief, the story moves at a quick pace, but the ending comes all too soon, and it leaves the reader wanting more, especially in regards to the life, post-Civil War, of Constance "Ash" Thompson. an extremely likable albeit enigmatic character.

Comparisons may be drawn to Charles Frazier's novel "Cold Mountain", a National Book Award-winning book that I didn't like when I initially read it. Like Hunt, Frazier is a beautiful writer. "Cold Mountain", however, was, in my opinion, too long and dull and emotionally draining. It left me feeling numb. Hunt's novel left me feeling sad for Ash and the plight that she suffered on the long walk home, but I felt far from numb. Hunt's novel was a fascinating, suspenseful, moving story of the Civil War; specifically, about the women who chose to risk their lives in battle and for whom history has relatively forgotten.

Ron Charles says

Ghosts crowd thick in Laird Hunt's Civil War novel, "Neverhome," and they're not just the shades of dead Blues and Grays. A host of literary allusions haunt this book, from "Cold Mountain" to "The Red Badge of Courage" and all the way back to Homer. But what's most striking is Hunt's effective reversal of the roles of brave warrior and patient homemaker. In this trim epic, Penelope marches into battle while Odysseus waits behind. Inspired by true tales of hundreds of women who fought in the War Between the States, "Neverhome" tells the story of a young wife named Constance who cuts her hair, binds her breasts and heads off to defend the Union in 1862.

That extraordinary act seems at first a way to spare her timid husband, Bartholomew, from the burden of enlisting. He's a great dancer but not much of a fighter. "We were about the same small size, but he was made out of wool and I was made out of wire," Constance says. "He would turn away any time he could, and I never, ever backed down."

Soon, it's clear that she isn't just protecting her husband back in Indiana; she craves the battlefield. "If I didn't stay to see some of the fight," she tells us, "I would forever be filled with the echoes of regret and the ache of remorse." Life among soldiers makes her "fierce happy."

Untraditional as they both are, Constance and Bartholomew are a good match, comfortable with their reversed roles, without sounding like third-wave feminists or even 21st-century liberals leaning in or helping out around the house. In fact, "Neverhome" succeeds largely because Constance's voice sounds so

historically distant, like a foreign cousin of our own era.

Hunt, whose previous novel, “Kind One,” was a finalist for last year’s PEN/Faulkner Award, avoids what Henry James called the “fatal cheapness” of historical fiction. The Master wasn’t just anticipating the stunning white teeth of those underwear models that make today’s costume dramas so anachronistic. He was warning about something beyond mere detail: “You may multiply the little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints, as much as you like,” James advised, but that can’t help an author with “the invention, the representation of the old consciousness, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose minds half the things that make ours, that make the modern world were non-existent.”

In “Neverhome,” Hunt lays out an “old consciousness” informed only by the example of Constance’s steely mother, who stood up for weaker people until she hanged herself from an ash tree in the yard. I suspect Hollywood is already circling around this story, trying to figure out how Constance can be stripped of her irreducible oddness and transformed into a Civil War Lara Croft. (Resist, Mr. Hunt, resist!)

Over the course of the novel, in a series of three- and four-page chapters, Hunt draws Constance through the weird mixture of horror and absurdity of a nation tearing itself apart. Disguised as a soldier, she gives herself the name Ash Thompson, but despite her sharp shot and good discipline, she’s never really one of the boys. Her fellow soldiers sense her reserve, even her special competence, and when she performs a courtesy for a girl in one of the towns they pass through, Constance gets the nickname “Gallant Ash,” a sobriquet that eventually inspires folktales and campfire songs.

The battle scenes are short and intense, filled with surreal images of sudden destruction wrought from afar. “We started to see gray off in the distance,” she says. “The cannon fire grew so hot it seemed like the injury was already being done to us before we had fairly arrived and that we were already part of the world’s everlasting grief and glory, and we could see the trees crashing down destroyed in the heights and hear the sound, from all quarters, of hurt men letting the air out of their throats. . . . The boy next to me caught his ravishing and fell away just as we were lifting our guns.” What a rare pleasure to spend a few hours listening to the natural poetry of that antique voice.

Even more compelling, though, are Constance’s peculiar adventures away from battle, when she’s captured by bandits or, later, imprisoned. Her ingenuity, combined with her ability to switch genders in a flash, makes her a particularly wily fighter. But nothing will prepare you for the way her quick-trigger brutality explodes off the page. Trained by her mother never to turn the other cheek, she doesn’t hesitate to shoot a dishonorable man in the mouth. Discovering that an assailant isn’t quite dead, she calmly shoots him again. “You get to where you can do things you couldn’t have dreamed up the outline of before,” she notes.

Other scenes along this picaresque adventure are “as vague as the horse’s dream.” Walking through a field that holds hundreds of “the dead and the about-dead,” passing through a town in which all the residents have gone mad, watching an assembly line of amputations — these real-life nightmares are as otherworldly as the scenes of ghostly visitation. But not all of Constance’s sights are unrelentingly ghastly. Indeed, one of the most memorable things she sees is a greenhouse made entirely from photographic glass plates of soldiers, their images gradually fading in the sun. How beautiful a vision is that?

Years later, looking over books on the Civil War, Constance complains, “You would think it was just captains and colonels and generals leading each other in one after another handsome charge. . . . In these stories, women are saints and angels and men are courageous noble folk and everything they do gets done nice and quick and nothing smells like blood.” Alas, she knows better: “It wasn’t pretty.” But in the daguerreotype hues of this narrative, the adventures of one unusual soldier are wound with the tones of an ancient tragedy.

This review first appeared in The Washington Post:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

Dawn H. says

Really surprised at the many 5 star ratings. I first was going to give it 1 simply because I finished it but reconsidered it's worth so gave it the 2. The first few chapters were promising but I felt it became just a bunch of independent storyline ideas thrown together to make a novel.

I wanted to understand why Constance REALLY felt the need to go off to war. Perhaps if the book had been longer allowing for more detail and continuity it would have been more of what I expected.

And don't even ask me what I thought of the ending!

Fuchsia Groan says

Como yo era fuerte y él no, fui yo a la guerra para defender la República.

Estados Unidos. Guerra de Secesión.

Constance cree que debe participar en el conflicto. Bartholomew, su marido, se queda en casa. Ella se viste de hombre, se convierte en el Galante Ash, y se va al frente. Igual que hicieron, se calcula, entre 400 y 700 mujeres.

Laird Hunt nos narra esta tremenda y terrible historia de un modo casi onírico. De episodio en episodio, vamos conociendo a distintos personajes, en una sucesión de relatos que están entre lo real y lo fantástico: Neva y su primo el "argonauta", el coronel, el hombre del caballo que soñaba, las tres niñas sin padres...

Es una novela hipnótica. La he devorado, se me ha metido dentro y no me abandona. Cuanto más pienso en lo leído más me gusta: que gire en torno a dos temas tan diferentes, la guerra y el amor, lo crudo de muchas escenas, cómo cada vez se hace más atroz e insoportable el estar en el frente... y quizás y por encima de todo, esa mezcla entre el mundo de la cordura y el de la locura, y esa línea tan fina que los separa, tan difíciles de distinguir incluso para nosotros, los lectores.

Shannon says

"I was strong and he was not, so it was me went to war to defend the Republic." In less than twenty words, Laird Hunt opens Neverhome with a perfect image of his protagonist's undeniable strength. With little more than a nod, Constance leaves behind her farm, name and husband to become Union soldier, Ash. Though the book is sprinkled with pensive moments spent reflecting the past with her mild-mannered husband Bartholomew, Ash is light years away from the dutiful wife or picture of femininity we so commonly associate with the time period.

But she isn't alone in her strength. All of Neverhome's female characters, including the looming presence of Ash's mother, offer surprises in their willingness to turn their back to convention. Hunt populates his novel with women who repeatedly break the mold of society's expectations, allowing their choices to run along the controversial decisions made by men rather than holding them to an angelic standard. Through this, we're given complex female characters instead of the one dimensional belles that so often fill stories from the Civil War era.

"I wanted to take up the dead man's head and cradle it but I did not do that and knew that that kind of a thought was another thing I was going to have to learn to kill."

Enhancing the complexity of the story is the narrative used to tell it. From the first blunt sentence to the novel's brilliant closing words, Ash's voice is an absolute force. Not quite dialect, rather the language of someone more accustomed to working than reading and writing, it can be difficult to follow. But it soon becomes clear how carefully placed each word is; every one meant to tumble over the next in a successful effort to make Ash sound genuine rather than stereotypical and mocking.

It's that voice that has gripped me since I turned the last page, asking questions and finding ways to remind me just how much this book has to offer in its slim volume.

More at rivercityreading.com

Diane S ? says

Over four hundred women fought on both sides of the Civil War. This is a story about one of the woman, Constance, who leaves her husband to take care of their farm in Indiana and goes off to fight for the Union.

In a short number of pages we follow Constance, who becomes Ash, as she hikes, hunts and forages for food, to the horrific and costly battle at Antietam, and through other trials and misfortunes. What is so amazing in this book is how detailed everything is, how wonderful the writing, how convincing the story was and how it paints a small slice of the Civil War. The blacks trying to move North, hoping to find a better life, the friendships made, the horror of battle and seeing the dead all around, the piles of limbs from the amputations, those on the road who are the walking wounded are all related here.

A powerful, albeit short novel that covers so much ground and does it so convincingly. A gutsy heroine whose misfortunes will not end after her service in the war and the secondary characters whose stories are heartbreaking as well, but still manage to provide a helping hand. A small glimpse of history, poignantly told.

ARC from Little Brown publishers.

Melanie says

Thank you to Little, Brown and Company for letting me read this book ahead of publication.

"Laird Hunt's new novel is a beguiling and evocative story about love and loss, duty and deceit. Through the assured voice of his narrator and the subtle beauty of his writing, Neverhome took me on a journey so thoroughly engrossed that there were times the pages seemed to turn themselves."

Kevin Powers, author of *The Yellow Birds*

"A spare, beautiful novel, so deeply about America and the language of America that its sentences seem to rise up from the earth itself. Laird Hunt had me under his spell from the first word of *Neverhome* to the last. Magnificent."

Paul Auster, author of *The New York Trilogy* and *Report from the Interior*

I add my voice to Kevin Power's and Paul Auster's. This was one hell of a novel.

A woman dresses up as a man and goes off to war as a Union soldier. Constance becomes Ash.

The simplest, purest writing is often the most incantatory. Here is a bewitching character that will seep into your skin for days and lead you softly by the hand through a divided nation whose burnt landscapes and fiery battles still echo in the United States' collective consciousness.

Her voice (and this entire novel is spun around the power of this *voice*) rises with an uncanny sense of self and the land, of dreams and memories, of shards of thoughts and primeval emotions. It imbues every single scene with such a vivid presence that each moment ends up imprinted on a photographic glass plate, indelible and haunting.

A novel that trembles between the natural world and those who bring fire to it, between a woman and her invented self, between the life force of an ideal and the stench of the dead.

One of my favourite books of 2014.

Angela M says

I call this quiet writing - simple language with phrases full of unbelievably clear descriptions. It's a small book, telling a big and bold story of a woman impersonating a man so she can go to war. She is strong, her husband is not, so she went to fight for the Union. Ash is physically strong, digs ditches and graves and her eyesight is sharp so she kills squirrels, pigs, and men. Stronger in will and mind to do what she sets out to do, she endures, while missing her husband, her home, her land. In doing so, she hides who she is to be true to herself.

Her "hell" on this journey is what this book is about. The war, her fellow soldiers, her colonel, the people she meets along the way - parts of this slice of time in this country. It is mind boggling to consider how much is in this story.

At one point Ash tells of her mother telling fairy tales ending one with the beginning of another, moving from one story into the next. This is just how this story is told - moving from one part of Ash's journey seamlessly to the next.

It is 256 pages full of heart, soul, and history, life, death, the land, and a character that will never leave you. It left me breathless - a small price to pay for this exquisite book.

Thanks so much to NetGalley and Little, Brown and Company for the opportunity to read this book.

Jill says

Take Homer's time-honored classic *The Odyssey* and give it a twist: what if Penelope were the warrior traveling home to Odysseus?

In Laird Hunt's brilliantly conceived novel, Constance Thompson – renamed Ash – disguises herself as a man and takes on the role of Union soldier in the Civil War. (Of her husband, she says: “I was strong and he was not, so it was me went to war to defend the Republic.”)

But is it as simple as that? Ash Thompson seems to be harboring some secrets. How much truth is she revealing to us? Is she an ultimate unreliable narrator?

Laird Hunt offers up an original and confident voice and dialect, and is consistently in command of his material. The prose is beautifully crafted and near flawless. (The only flaw is that I had some qualms about whether this was a true female voice or a male-author-channeling-a-female voice).

It has a lot to say about the false glorification of the Civil War (Ash reflects, “In these stories women are saints and angels and men are courageous noble folk and everything they do gets done nice and quick and nothing smells like blood.”) There's the stuff of legend and the stuff of reality...the lure of adventure and the lure of home... the roles we're born into and the roles we invent for ourselves to play.

It's a fine book and I rate it 4.5 stars. I do have one nitpick: Laird Hunt mentions Kettering, Ohio on the very first page; actually, that town got its name in 1955, way after the Civil War.

Mary says

I was strong and he was not, so it was me went to war to defend the Republic.

Constance Thompson leaves her tranquil farm and peaceful husband to become Ash Thompson, a sharpshooter with the Union Army. The story meanders through bloody battles, odd encounters with various people and dream sequences, and at times, it's hard to distinguish between what is "real" and what isn't. It's a retelling of *The Odyssey*, which I likely wouldn't have realized except for a fairly heavy-handed hint within the text, but which does help to explain some of the more bizarre episodes. I am okay with retellings but felt unmoved by this one. The main character Ash is detached and reticent, and the other characters, especially her husband, were not fully developed. I never clearly understood Ash's motivations for joining the army, nor did I believe the relationship she had with her husband would motivate her to return. I admire the author's ambition, but I was hoping for something different, less literary and more engaging.

thewanderingjew says

On the surface, Laird Hunt has written a touching tale about a woman's love for her husband and the sacrifice she made for him. She went off to fight in the Civil War, leaving him, the weaker one, behind. Since Constance was more masculine in her demeanor and Bartholomew was more feminine, they reversed roles, and he remained at home to tend the farm. Constance Thompson became Ash Thompson and broke her husband's heart when she left as an entirely different person.

The “Ballad of Gallant Ash” could be an alternate title for this book. Constance needed to join the cause of the Union Army in order to protect her husband and challenge the pain she always carried within her heart and mind. Since her husband was not a tough enough person to go and would certainly meet his death, she donned the clothes of a man and left, hoping to return at the war’s end. Chasing her own fears in the process, she often wondered if fear would find her instead, as her mother had once predicted.

The beauty of the tale is that it is narrated by Constance/Ash, a tough Indiana farmer’s wife, in a voice that is genuine and authentic as a female, but her actions are also credible in the role of a male. Since she is comfortable in the outdoors and is a competent hunter, she is able to use her wiles and her expertise with a gun to protect herself. She is more capable than most of the new recruits, so she quickly makes herself a legend-like soldier, able to do most of what is required proficiently.

The tragedy of war, and what it extorts from enemy and ally alike, is so clearly drawn that when the final page is turned, the reader is almost more than a witness to the events; the reader is almost a participant. The descriptions of the battles are matter of fact, expressed in the simplest of terms, yet they put you in the thick and thin of the fray. Most of the emotion is removed, and only the clear and very concise telling of it remains, describing all of the causes and effects of particular moments in battle, each one almost more significant than the other, if that is possible.

Below the surface, it is a fast, but painful read as it feels like a confession, spoken in the most uncomplicated and honest terms. The sheer simplicity of the tale, in so few words, evokes all the pain of slavery, the agony of war, the depth of lost love and lost children, the enormous sacrifice required and the devotion and loyalty war sometimes inspires in spite of the betrayal it often witnesses. It is quite remarkable in its portrayal of the Civil War. The development of the main character is superb. As her persona changes, from male to female, and back again, she remains a true representation of the female/male soldier and that masquerade that existed during the war.

The tale truly acknowledges the ugliness, violence and hypocrisy of war and shows the soldiers displaying fear and mistrust, disloyalty and deceit, cruelty and shame. It also shows the devotion of those either left behind or actively fighting, to their loved ones and their country, even as it displays, loud and clear, the utter waste war leaves behind, the sheer madness and fear it produces, and the senselessness of the inflicted pain, injustice and retribution, which only lead to more heartache and tragedy in a never ending spiral.

In the language of the poor farmer, without much education, with its own ungrammatical charm, it felt as if Constance/Ash was speaking directly to me. At other times it felt almost like a personal diary, a simple relating of the facts of the day, as she wrote her letters, or spoke with others. As she documented the experiences she witnessed, even when filled with horror, they almost seemed mundane. It seemed as if Ash was becoming more and more inured to the brutality of the war but also completely imbued with its horror and a need for revenge. Her need to extract retribution for the injustices done to herself and her family were eventually her tragic undoing.

Erin says

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Laird Hunt’s Neverhome has received much acclaim and that is wonderful, but that said, I feel the time I spent on the book well and truly wasted. My apologies to fans of both the author and his work, but I found

very little of this narrative appealed to my particular tastes.

Personally, I found it very difficult to relate to Ash and had a hard time manufacturing empathy for her trials and circumstances. To be perfectly honest, I didn't care if she survived her journey home and that fact made it impossible to appreciate the hurdles she faced over the course of the narrative.

Hunt's tone is dark and ultimately rather depressing and while I've nothing against his style or themes, I can't say his effort packed the punch I'd anticipated. To be perfectly blunt, I felt the pacing slow, the action monotonous and the ending abrupt and uninspired.

At the end of the day, I'm definitely disappointed at having wasted my time on Neverhome. There was a lot of potential in the idea, but I don't think Hunt rose to the occasion and won't be recommending it forward.

Maxwell says

I received this eARC from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review. This in no way affects my opinion of the book.

Ash Thompson is a soldier in the Union Army during the American Civil War. He fights alongside his fellow northerners and has quite a few interesting experiences, being kidnapped, sent to jail, and more. However, he has a secret: he's actually a woman. Yeah, Constance is her real name, and for some reason (seriously, some unknown reason the book never really explains, ugh) she has taken her husband's place in the war.

This book is quite short, but it's surprisingly quite slow as well. Not a whole lot of action takes place. Basically the book follows Constance over about two years of fighting in the Civil War before she returns back home to her husband and their farm (not a spoiler).

The problem I had with this book is that it was all 'tell' and very little 'show.' What I mean by that is the narrator essentially told you everything that was happening instead of having the prose of the story play it out. It's told in the 1st person, but I think I would have preferred it in the 3rd person. Constance just seems emotionless, as if she is trying to tell her whole story objectively, without putting in much of her feelings or thoughts into her experiences.

Also, the ending was quite abrupt. I guess it spiced up the novel a bit, because as a whole there isn't much plot or exciting stuff. I think this book had a lot of potential to be interesting, with the whole concept of women fighters in the Civil War. But sadly it fell a bit flat.

Naomi says

2.5 stars

I wish the title of this book for me would have been Neverread because it kills me to give it this rating. Although I had been looking forward to this book, I found that I couldn't get into it. The last 75 pages were pure torture and I felt like I was running in quick sand to get through them. The book was too focused on day to day, which made it extremely difficult for me. I wanted to know more about the psyche of Ash (Constance). Why did she (and almost 500 women) choose to fight? What I found was a book on the daily excursions of war that when the important questions had been answered, it had already lost my interest. I

Really bummed about this one but there was no way I could go as low as one star.

Rebecca says

Hunt's sixth novel reveals the little-known history of women fighting in America's Civil War. Ash Thompson travels from Indiana to Ohio to enlist for the Union. But here's the rub: Ash is actually Constance, Bartholomew's wife. *Neverhome* is Constance's journey into battle and finally back home, by way of enemy territory, a makeshift prison, and even a lunatic asylum.

Homer's *Odyssey* may be the most obvious reference point here – indeed, one character makes the explicit connection, remarking, “Penelope gone to the war and Odysseus staying home” – but there is plenty of Shakespearean cross-dressing comedy, too. Another pleasure of the novel is Constance's folksy vocabulary. Tails off in the last third, but the twist ending is worth waiting for.

(See my full review at Nudge.)

*Note: The comparison is with James McBride's *The Good Lord Bird*.
