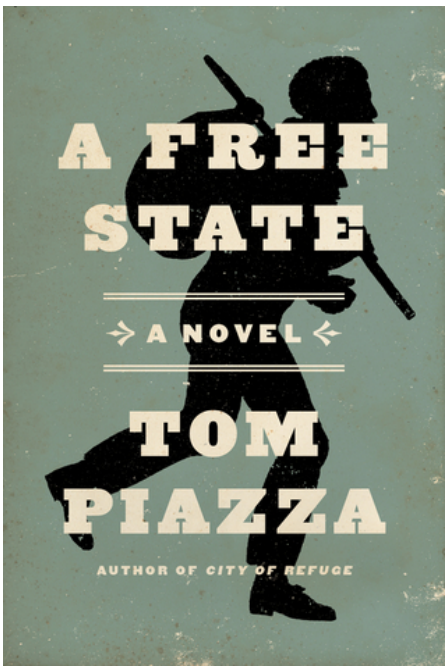

A Free State

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The author of *City of Refuge* returns with a startling and powerful novel of race, violence, and identity set on the eve of the Civil War.

The year is 1855. Blackface minstrelsy is the most popular form of entertainment in a nation about to be torn apart by the battle over slavery. Henry Sims, a fugitive slave and a brilliant musician, has escaped to Philadelphia, where he earns money living by his wits and performing on the street. He is befriended by James Douglass, leader of a popular minstrel troupe struggling to compete with dozens of similar ensembles, who imagines that Henry's skill and magnetism might restore his troupe's sagging fortunes.

The problem is that black and white performers are not allowed to appear together onstage. Together, the two concoct a masquerade to protect Henry's identity, and Henry creates a sensation in his first appearances with the troupe. Yet even as their plan begins to reverse the troupe's decline, a brutal slave hunter named Tull Burton has been employed by Henry's former master to track down the runaway and retrieve him, by any means necessary.

Bursting with narrative tension and unforgettable characters, shot through with unexpected turns and insight, *A Free State* is a thrilling reimagining of the American story by a novelist at the height of his powers.

A Free State Details

Date	:	Published September 15th 2015 by Harper
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Author	:	Tom Piazza
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From Reader Review A Free State for online ebook

Jim Steele says

I didn't like this book at all. I found it preachy - evil white people, unfairly downcast black. It was also incredibly racist - with Tom Sawyer being thrown out of school libraries for its treatment of Jim, how could this book be published.

The message seems to be things haven't changed racially in America since the Civil War, a position I completely disagree with.

The story is about a young slave, the son of the plantation owner and one of his slaves. The boy runs away and is pursued by an overdrawn, evil bounty hunter. The boy heads north to Pennsylvania (he lives on a plantation in Virginia). He decides to join a white minstrel group and perform in blackface. Of course, the bounty hunter finds him. He ends up in the home of a US Senator, a true historical figure who finds he cannot adopt a purely abolitionist position due to political considerations.

That's enough about the plot. The biggest problem I had with this book was that it shifts narrator regularly. The narrator is never identified and they all have the same voice. This makes things rather confusing, or it did to this casual reader who didn't particularly care who was talking.

Enough! I could write about this all day, but I'd be thrown off this page I'm sure. We're in a generation that wants to sit around and beat on itself rather than trying to peacefully fix things. Wow, this book really fits the mold!!

Wendy says

When I saw that Tom Piazza had a new novel out I couldn't wait to read it. I fell in love with his writing when I read his books "City of Refuge" and "Why New Orleans Matters" and he definitely did not disappoint with "A Free State". He is an incredibly author and he is at the top of his game. Everything he writes makes you stop and think and his novels always touch me like no other books have ever done before. What an amazing writer!

Betsy Phillips says

Wow.

Marvin says

This wonderfully vivid novel, set mostly in Philadelphia sometime before the Civil War, could make a good film. Much of it is narrated by a young man who performs with and manages a popular blackface minstrel troupe in Philly. Most of the rest is narrated in third person from the perspective of a vicious slavecatcher. A little of it is told, also in third person, from the perspective of a fugitive slave, a banjo virtuoso, who briefly performs with the minstrel troupe. A final section is narrated in first person by a Senator whose wife runs a

stop on the Underground Railroad. It’s an evocative account of the moral awakening of the minstrel to the lies his performances reflect. And yet . . . in that final section, after a remarkable conversation in which the fugitive waxes nostalgic about life on the plantation, even as he vows that he would not go back for anything, the Senator muses, “How would one manage to live in the world, carrying that peculiar burden of nostalgia for an intolerable situation? What were the costs of leaving a place whose familiarity both sustained you and threatened to extinguish you?” (229)

Carol says

This book is told through the eyes of a runaway slave who loves to play the banjar, the white minstrel who himself ran away from his fathers' farm to pursue his life, the awful slave hunter and lastly the senator who is an avid abolitionist.

The author, Tom Piazza, must really love music because of the wonderful explanations of the freeing feelings Henry, the runaway slave, felt when he was playing the banjar as well as James when he was performing in the minstrel show. I believe the senator had some type of freeing feelings when he and his wife helped slaves escape. As far as the slave hunters' feelings I guess there has to be evil in the world.

Joel Bass says

Not the most eloquent writing, but a suspenseful and evocative tale, definitely putting me squarely in the weird, delusional society of mid-19th-Century America. And of course, one can't help but draw parellels to the weird, delusional society of today.

Barbara says

Wow, this short (235 pages) novel packs a punch. Author Tom Piazza chooses the mid 19th century, a time of slavery and Colonial State polarity, to exam the phenomenon of Minstrelsy Entertainment. This is a time where the North and the South were divided upon the idea of slavery. Yet, Minstrelsy involved WHITE men painting their faces black and entertaining white folk as Vaudeville-type black men. This form of entertainment was extremely popular at the time. Piazza uses this novel to show the conflicting realities in what was real for slaves versus what white people wanted to see.

At this time, slaves were running away to the North to become free. This novel takes place in Philadelphia, where blacks are free. However, if an escaping slave is found in the Northern States, legally the law must help arrest said slave to be brought back to his Master. This sets the stage for the novel.

As the book jacket states, Henry Sims is a fugitive slave and a brilliant musician who has escaped to Philadelphia where he attempts to support himself through his gift of music. James Douglass is a leader of a minstrel troupe who is struggling to keep attendance up at their shows. James comes upon Henry, and brokers a deal to appear on stage with his troupe. The problem is that it is illegal for a black man to pose as a white man portraying a black man….sound confusing??? It was a confusing time.

Enter a slave hunter, Tull Burton, who will send chills through your body reading the novel. Tull is

interesting in that he loathes slave owners more than the slaves. His job is purely professional. He requires respect. He will just as easily torture a white person as a black. He’s not racist. He’s a sicko. He wants to complete his job and will harm anyone in his way.

Tull is after Henry. Piazza writes his characters so well, that the reader is very worried for Henry. The reader understands Tull and his capabilities.

What makes a novel great is educating the reader of things not previously obvious. Beautiful prose comes into play of a great novel. An absorbing story is a requirement. I highly recommend this very short, but thoughtful novel for all readers. I am grateful to GR friend Melissa for pointing the way to this one. It’s a fine read!

Edward Newman says

(Note: Tom Piazza is a friend of mine.) This is a novel that will shake you--rapturously beautiful descriptions of the joy and freedom music brings, the degradation that American Slavery brought to everyone touched by it--and most Americans were--it all comes together in this story of escaped slaver Henry Sims, a master banjo player, who finds shelter with white men who make their living play acting as slaves in a minstrel show in 1855 Philadelphia. Piazza again plumbs the fault lines of American society--this is a book you'll wish was twice as long.

Rachel says

I just finished this book and I'm not sure what I think. It was very much not what I expected. I thought it was going to be about the "free state" of Jones in the civil war. But that's my own fault for not reading the synopsis more carefully.

The book was well written and was mostly told from the unusual perspective--at least one I hadn't read before--of a white man in a minstrel show in the north before the civil war. Parts of the story were also told from the point of view of a runaway slave (before and after he ran), a disgustingly nasty runaway slave hunter, and, at the end, William Seward, the real-life US Senator and abolitionist.

What I liked about the book was that it illustrated an unfamiliar time and from an unfamiliar perspective. However, I had a strange feeling throughout the book because the author kept tossing in the racist/racially aware misgivings of the minstrel show performer narrator --this seemed too pat a solution to portraying a story from the perspective of a guy participating in a nasty and today almost unbelievably offensive performance. It seemed that since the author was dealing with a unpleasant subject and a distasteful profession, he tried to make it "ok" by showing us the narrator was really a good guy hanging with a bad crowd.

The characters in general were too much their archetypes. We had an above-average, heroic, intelligent, well-read, and multi-talented escaped slave, a disgusting, revolting, inhuman slave hunter guy, and the main narrator, right in the middle, kind of deciding how to behave in the world. Except no one really got to do much self-discovery in the book and the bad guys stayed bad, the good stayed good and the mediocre was also present at the end of the story.

I'm not sure stationary character types are enough of a reason for not wholly enjoying the book, but there you go. It was unpleasant reading about the slave hunter, so maybe that colors my opinion as well.

If you are curious about minstrelsy in the antebellum north and don't want non-fiction, try this book, see what you think and I'd be curious to read your review.

I received this book from a Goodreads giveaway.

John Walker says

A short historical fiction story of Henry Simms, a runaway slave in the year 1855. The horrors of slave life are painted here, but the main story is Henry's escape from the Virginia plantation to the wonders of Philadelphia and his becoming involved with James Douglass who, with great risk, hires Henry for his minstrel troupe.
Unbeknownst to them the plantation owner sends Tull Burton, a dogged slave hunter, who won't give up to trace Henry and bring him back.

The history is top notched in not only the short history of the minstrel show of the era, but the evils of returning slaves back to their owners. The period of those days puts the read cheering for Henry while the dread of Burton pursuit keep the reader hanging on the edge of their chair.

AFMasten says

Flat main character. Typical romantic male view of 19th century circus life . Violence used poorly to create an evil character. Dearth of female characters (the white minstrel's good-hearted mother and the badly-used, good-hearted seamstress). The book does contain one very nicely written scene describing the black dancer's performance. More of the book might have been from his perspective.

Lynn says

I first picked this novel thinking it was about the US Civil War. And, in a way, it is. Free States/Slave States. But it's also about the state of being free. More specifically, the 'black face' [the application of burnt cork] which transformed a white man into a 'black man' which was the staple of early-Vaudeville. What happens when a black man wants to perform on the stage and has the talent to perform on the stage, but is prohibited from performing on the stage? He further blackens his face and takes to the stage. Replete with runaway slaves and bounty hunters, this is quite the satisfying read.

I read this E-ARC courtesy of the publisher and Edelweiss.

Diane S ? says

3.5 Philadelphia, 1855, a young black man appears on street corners, playing the banjar. He amazing playing is noticed by James Douglass, leader of the Virginia Harmonists, a minstrel show whose audience is slowly dwindling. James is meant to be working the farm with his brothers and Joseph, the black man actually belongs on a plantation, the property of his father and master. He is hunted by Tull, a cruel and sadistic slave, runaway hunter.

I have read in a few books, but just mentions, of the minstrel shows, the curious acts where white men put on blackface and performed as negroes, their songs, their speech. This is the first time I have read a book where these shows were a big part of the plot. The underground railroad, the right of a man to be free and the moral dilemma that will eventually ensnare James. The music, the freedom that music can provide even in less than ideal settings. I loved the characters in this book, well except for a few, they were very unusual and went against the known stereotypes of that time. Tull was a psychopath and chose a path that let him give full rage to his work.

This quote, while appropriate back then, still applies to many circumstances now, actually way too many which begs the question, How far have we really advanced?

"If one has the upper hand in a situation, and uses it to exploit another to that others detriment, one cannot call oneself civilized. By the measure, perhaps, none of us can call himself fully civilized. Yet one may strive for that ideal at least. Otherwise one's career as a decent human being is at an end."

Melissa Crytzer Fry says

3.75

I enjoyed this little book with its big themes and its spotlight on a little-known form of entertainment during the mid-1800s: minstrelsy – the musical/theatrical minstrel shows involving white men who blackened their faces with burnt cork and took to the stage, parodying slave life.

This slim novel is a study of contradictions –how the white performers experienced their own sense of creative freedom when donning the black masks, never really considering the ways their actions mocked the very sanctity of freedom. A runaway slave, Henry, is introduced to these performers, creating an undeniable juxtaposition.

The story, told through the perspective of a white minstrel, a runaway slave, and slave hunter, begs the questions: What defines freedom? What is a free state? Can it be a state of mind, a physical U.S. territory, a state of consciousness or a state of morality…

One of my favorite aspects of the novel is the clear love the author has for music. It sings and rollicks across the pages and transports the reader – even if she has never picked up a banjo or fiddle or played a musical instrument. I can’t state how masterful is this portrayal of music and its ability to transport! Music is timeless, ageless and doesn’t notice color.

My quibbles are with the length and the ending/s for the main characters. The book was only 235 pages long, and I felt the characters could have been more rounded with a hundred extra pages (though Piazza is a master of sparse but affecting prose). So, while I am a fan of open endings, this one was even a bit too abrupt for me.

Though I realize this was a well-planned literary convention aimed at illuminating just how ambiguous

freedom, in all its iterations, can be – how fleeting it can be and how a quest for it may be ongoing for some.

If you enjoy pre-Civil War era historical fiction, this one’s for you.

Steve Smits says

Sometime in the late 1850’s Henry Sims, a run away slave from Virginia, arrives in Philadelphia. With the assistance of a secret network he has escaped from the Stephens plantation where the master, we are told, is his father. Henry was not a field worker; he was favored with lighter duty around the house and carpentry shop. Henry is a virtuoso banjo player and performer who is called often to perform for his master and guest at balls and social gatherings. Despite circumstances far less oppressive than the field hands, Henry is acutely sensitive to the degradation permeating his status as a slave.

Henry plays his banjo on the streets of Philadelphia for small change. He is heard by James Douglass. Douglass is a performer in, and the manager of, a successful minstrel troupe that has a regular venue in a Philadelphia theater. Douglass is a sort of run away also, having left the harsh life on a small farmer run by his older brothers. He ran off with a circus eventually learning the minstrel routine very popular at the time.

Douglass is astounded by Sims’s artistry. He has been looking to perk up his company’s act, it having become flat and seen a decline in attendance and ticket revenue. There’s one major problem, though. The laws at the time would not permit a Negro to perform on stage. Douglass concocts a scheme to get around this. Sims, the son of a white man and black woman, is light-complexioned with green eyes. Douglass suspects that Sims might be a run away slave. The laws on fugitive slaves will put him and his company in legal jeopardy if he is discovered to be harboring Sims. Nonetheless, Douglass thinks he can convince his fellow minstrels that Sims is Mexican (Sims can speak a pigeon-type nonsense Spanish he picked up on the plantation.) By using the burnt cork black face employed by the performers, Douglass thinks he can fool his fellow performers and the audience. Though aware of the deeply demeaning portrayal of blacks Sims is driven to perform his musical talent, as well as being destitute of money. When he appears on stage he is a sensation and his performance draws full houses again to the shows.

Douglass is infatuated with Rose, a seamstress who makes the troupe's costumes. Rose has spurned Douglass in favor of a fellow cast member, but in vague ways she seems to have developed a relationship with Henry.

Master Stephens contracts with Tull, a notorious slave hunter to find Sims and return him. Tull is a vicious character who would as soon return escaped slaves dead as alive. He tracks Sims to Philadelphia where he soon discovers him performing in the show. Tull subdues Sims and binds him for the trip back to Virginia, but Douglass assaults Tull enabling Sims to get free. The entire episode undermines the performing company and they break up. Douglass has realized that minstrelsy is an utterly degrading depiction of Negros and their conditions of servitude and abandons this as a profession.

In an interesting twist, the story shifts to the Auburn, NY home of Senator William Seward. Seward is an abolitionist at heart although politically cautious about how he expresses this. The time must be around 1859 because Seward reveals his ambition to get the presidential nomination (that went to Lincoln the next year). Seward’s wife Addie is an active supporter of the Underground Railroad and has made their home’s basement a way station for slaves looking to make their way to Canada. Sims arrives and the Seward’s soon discover Sim’s remarkable talent and discern that he is highly intelligent (a devotee of the works of Dickens). Seward entertains the idea that he will get Sims to Rochester where he can fall in with Frederick Douglass. But, a stranger loitering around Seward’s house turns out to be Tull, still in pursuit of Sims.

Seward chases Tull off, but when he looks for Sims to tell him of his narrow escape from capture, he finds that he has vanished. We are not told where Sims has gone, perhaps on to Canada or just further on the Freedom Trail.

This short but powerful novel uses biting irony to examine concepts of racial identity extant in antebellum America. For the amusement of white audiences, white men posed as blacks in theatrical performances; performances that were abominably degrading to Negros. Black-face minstrelsy was popular until well into the 20th century and even after the minstrel motif faded motion pictures of the 1930's and 40's gave us humiliating caricatures of black men and women. Today we find such portrayals repulsive. Sims who had stellar musical talent and a keen intellect disguised his racial identity by posing as a Mexican who used black face to convert his false identity to an even falser one – a black man who convinced the audience he was white by portraying his stage persona as black. Americans of that era held deep-seated misapprehensions about race in our society, damaging notions that lie at the root of our racism. Nineteenth century (white) society made rules for demarcating racial lines, often based on absurd linkages to distant relatives who were non-white. Hence, such nonsensical but hurtful distinctions such as mulatto, octaroon, etc. Obsession with race lingered, of course, in powerful ways long after the 19th century. Consider that only recently on official census forms have we abandoned strict racial categories, suggesting (finally) that racial identity can be murky and, we can only hope, more and more meaningless. Nonetheless, in the long history of our racism, race mixing was held overtly to be a horrible thing by white society, except where, of course, (or perhaps because) white males exploited Negro women. The need to sublimate white hypocrisy led, as we know, to despicable violence toward blacks. Piazza intrigues us by hinting that the child Rose is carrying is the result of a liaison between her and Henry, that the child will be of mixed race.

In addition to its powerful and provocative themes about race, Piazza describes mid-19th century Philadelphia with color and vividness that helps the story succeed so well.