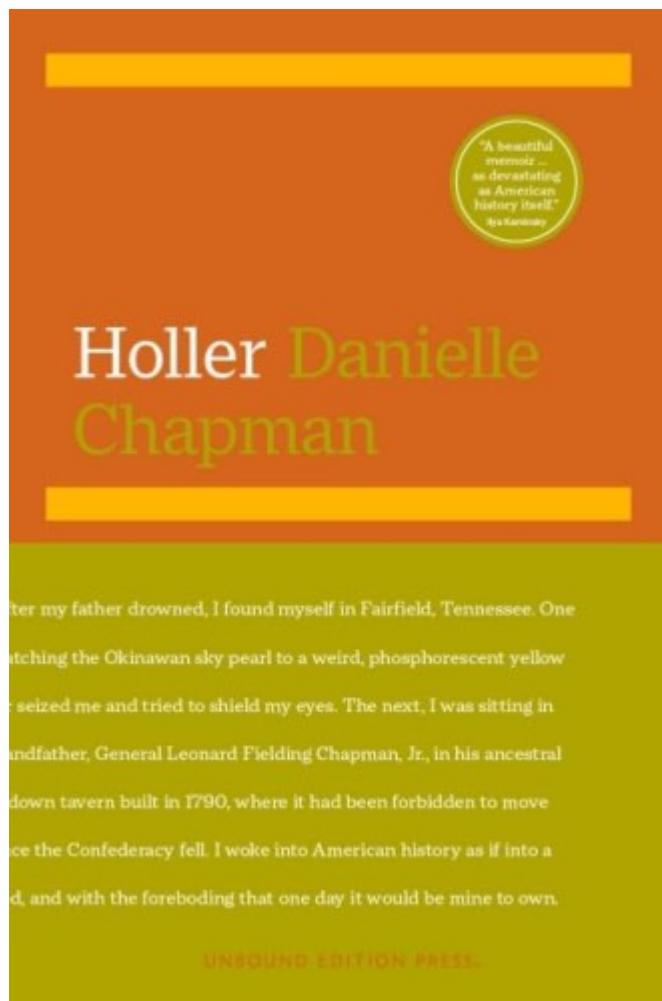


A poet's quarrel with herself

Danielle Chapman's lustrous memoir is at its best when she holds her family's Confederate history up to the light.

by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue
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In Review



Holler

A Poet among Patriots

By Danielle Chapman
Unbound Edition Press
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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

In the preface to her new memoir, poet Danielle Chapman ruminates on what it means to write about growing up White in the South. Writing a memoir means exhuming memories of those who raised us, and for Chapman that requires describing the “unforgettable Southern characters from my childhood, who, if they hadn’t loved me with such grizzled fervor, I could easily have lumped in with the feller who brought his own crucifixion cross to the Capitol on January sixth.”

Clearly, such a project carries colossal hazards, and you get the sense that this is a book that almost wasn’t. Chapman forged ahead, though. The result is a memoir of sprawling proportions, stretching between a daughter’s grief, a nation’s wars, and a crumbling house in Tennessee in whose front hall “all of Western Civilization—White People’s History—announces itself as a preoccupation, a fetish, and a relic.”

I’d call the book a reckoning if the word itself weren’t becoming something of a relic—a symbol of what White people thought we were doing, there for awhile back in 2020, before we managed to set the reckoning (if not the racism) safely on a shelf. Better, then, to call the book what Chapman says it is, evoking W. B. Yeats’s definition of poetry as a “quarrel with ourselves.” *Holler* is indeed a White woman’s scrap with herself and her ancestors. It’s both an intimate fracas with family and a falling out with America’s claims of liberty and justice for all. “How can heaven and hell exist cheek by jowl in a place, in a person, in a nation’s history, and in oneself?” Chapman asks, her book becoming its own fretful attempt at an answer. Readers will not regret entering the fray.

Chapman’s prose is lustrous (“phosphorescent,” poet Rosanna Warren calls it in her endorsement) and her gaze unfaltering. A poet whose second collection of poems is due out later this year, Chapman writes with abandon, with what seems a primal instinct for rhythm and image. She describes watching her father drown in the Pacific Ocean when she was three, the memory “scalded into the basin of my brain, which I was forever picking up and polishing, like an arcane jewel.” Her mother was with him in the ocean that day too; she later told her daughter that while she wanted to die with her husband as he was swept away by a wave, “*God told me I*

had to live to take care of you, she said. And I did."

Her father's parents helped her widowed mother raise her, so she spent school years in Virginia and summers in Tennessee. Looming particularly large in her life was her grandfather, whom she calls Papa, a celebrated World War II veteran and a general who still received phone calls from the Pentagon in his retirement. He palled around with presidents and other generals—including "Ole Shof," whom she describes as a "huge fire hose of a man" whose "cauliflowered nose would purple under his wagging white forelock as he reenacted the sieges, imprisonments, and escapes he'd masterminded, which had somehow led directly to the Allied victory in the Pacific."

Chapman's grandfather thought it uncouth to tell war stories, but the casual bigotry and self-aggrandizing stories of his friends became the things against which a young Chapman defined herself, longing to become everything these World War II warhorses were not. She directed her adolescent fury mostly at Papa, who in the face of his friends' bigotry "didn't join in, but he didn't object either."

Chapman rejects the trap that looks like liberty, the innocence that was never innocence at all.

It's such strands of genteel complicity and mannered barbarism that Chapman fingers throughout the book. Tracing the double helixes of Whiteness and patriotism, racism and militarism, down through generations, she knows they snake their way into her. Chapman is descended from Confederate soldiers and enslavers—her multiple-great-grandfather was a slave trader—and the strongest points of her book come when she holds her family history up to the light. Her grandmother grew up in Selma as a debutante, "one of the last living exemplars of the 'Southern white womanhood' that the Klan had invented itself to defend," Chapman writes. Her grandfather passed on family lore about his own Confederate grandfather, whose life was saved by George Singleton, a Black man he enslaved: Singleton rescued him from a field of corpses and then saved his family by keeping the farm going during the war.

Toward the end of the book, Chapman meets Singleton's descendants, and she must again argue with herself and with history. She knows that such a legend is the stuff of a White supremacist imagination, the loyal magical Negro saving the White master. Her grandfather's angle on the story infuriates her. Yet the Black

descendants of Singleton tell and retell the same story, and they bristle at her suggestion that it's problematic. She realizes that to erase the story would be to dismiss Singleton's true heroism and compassion. There's no right way to tell this story or to leave it untold. Nor can Chapman escape the implication that she owes her very existence to Singleton, who had "saved my family twice and without whom I would not have been alive."

At points, Chapman's writing can feel a bit unkempt, a trumpet vine of prose winding itself around memory. Some readers' interest may flag during extended literary reflections on King Lear in the first chapter or memory sequences of a high school boyfriend in a later one. Yet at the end of *Holler* I still wished for more, a longer entanglement.

Chapman, who is married to poet Christian Wiman, writes that a childhood marked by loss trained her toward a particular kind of sight. As she watched the raging rioters at the Capitol on January 6, she says, "I knew that, despite all their hollering, all their violence and delusion and wrath, they were suffering." As an editor, I'm currently working with an author writing about women who stormed the Capitol on January 6, and she keeps uncovering trauma after trauma in the lives of her subjects: sexual abuse, domestic violence, poverty, addiction.

Listening to other humans has a way of acquainting us with the short distance between grief and grievance. Yet even as White writers like Chapman point to the pain beneath the barbarism, and even as I believe that seeing the *imago Dei* in even the most detestable person is central to Christian faith, I sometimes wonder: Who really needs to read about the suffering of White folks? Whose ears should hear the holler?

So *Holler* may not be a book for everyone. But it does take up James Baldwin's challenge to those he calls, with such astringent irony, the "innocent people" of this land. "They are, in effect, still trapped in a history they do not understand," Baldwin writes about White people in *The Fire Next Time*, "and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it."

Here in these days, as Christian Trumpism again reaches a fever pitch, many White people remain trapped in a history we refuse to comprehend. We are like Chapman's ancestors, who remained "professionally unfussed by the evil in their world and in themselves."

Unlike her forebears, however, Chapman refuses to be untroubled. Her book rejects the trap that looks like liberty, the innocence that was never innocence at all. “Can we yet train ourselves to admit the past more fully and honestly?” asks poet and memoirist Tracy K. Smith in *To Free the Captives*. “If so, what might we learn about this thing we call freedom?”