By DREW BLAKEMAN

The American Civil War is perhaps the most highly romanticized period of our nation's history, with dashing Rhett's and coquettish Scarlett's headlining the myths. This, despite the fact that this war was by far the bloodiest war this country ever fought, with more than 500,000 soldiers from both sides killed (and a like number sustaining injuries) out of some four million Union and Confederate combatants.

One of the lesser-known facts of the War Between the States is that a number of women disguised themselves as men in order to join the battle. Some were killed; those who survived generally melted back into society — either reverting back to their femininity identity or remaining in masculine drag. A tiny handful publicized their exploits on the battlefield by writing books and becoming the toast of the 19th Century lecture circuit.

Rita Mae Brown's latest novel, High Hearts, follows the trials and tribulations of the fictitious Chatfield family, prominent Charlottesville, Virginia horse-breeders, through the first sixteen months of the war. On April 12, 1861, eighteen-year-old Geneva Chatfield marries her beau, Nash Hart. She is a tall, slender tomboy who happens to be the best horseman in Albemarle County; he is a budding poet who is glad to be marrying into an equestrian family which is not involved in the dirty business of commerce.

That same day, the hostilities begin in Charleston, South Carolina, when a battery fires upon Fort Sumter and drives out the garrison. In Virginia, the first battle, which would not be for several more months into the future, Lutie Chatfield marries her beau, Nash Hart. She is a tall, slender tomboy who happens to be the best horseman in Albemarle County; he is a budding poet who is glad to be marrying into an equestrian family which is not involved in the dirty business of commerce.

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With the army still in training for its first battle, which would not be for several more months into the future, Lutie Chatfield has her hands full trying to run the expansive estate. Lutie's personal servant, Sin-Sin, and the plantation's chief cook, Ernie June, escalate their long-running power struggle over who should be the head honcho among the slaves and thus command the most power at the estate. Another of the slaves is brutally murdered, the unknown killer still at large and working on the plantation. The action in High Hearts shifts back and forth between the war in the battlefield and the war back home; occasionally the two take place on the same ground.

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