

Palma Frable, First Place winner

Fear,” *An unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat*”, is the *real* antagonist in this novel. Fear of the past, fear of the future, fear of unworthiness and fear of failure, all drive the characters in this novel in varying degrees, but none more so than Sam, a black man, and a free-man. This novel takes the reader along with him in his fifteen+ year journey, sometimes in glimpses of the past, to seek his beloved Tilda, his wife, and grasp the one thing that has eluded him for so long, forgiveness. Along the way he develops several key relationships and forges friendships with the most unlikely people and in the most unusual of places. What he gleans from these people is not as significant as what they gain from knowing him, a glimpse of human devotion to a “love that never fails”. I could never put to writing in just two or three pages all the dynamics and textures that these characters weave, but attempt I must. So please, follow along with me as I share with you what I have garnered from my time with Sam and those who have been with him on his journey.

We begin the journey with an ending...the end of the Civil War. The year of course is 1865 and we find Sam in the north, working in a library in Philadelphia. That is where he landed after he fled the horrors of his past, slavery in the south. With the ending of the war, Sam knows he must deal with his own war, the war within himself, what he has been dealing with for over fifteen years, his failure to Tilda, his wife. He knows he must find her, to seek her forgiveness for causing the unforgivable, the death of their only son. For you see, Sam was once what thousands of black men and women were during one of the darkest times in our history, he was a slave. His journey back to the south would put him in the path of rage and resentment, sorrow and spite.

Along his path he would also be shown grace and goodwill, beauty and benevolence. One divine appointment led him into the direct path of a woman who, driven by the fear of the future, sought to initiate change. Change was not welcome in the war ravaged south.

Prudence “Pru” Kent, a white war widow and the daughter of John Cafferty, a man who made a part of his life’s work to put an end to slavery, readied herself for a life changing journey. She was bringing the bright and glorious gift of knowledge to a dark and gloomy place, the emancipated slaves of the once proud Confederate South. Following her father’s work and wishes, she journeys with her beloved companion, Miss Bonnie, a slave freed by her father some twenty years ago. Though the journey is tedious and tiring, they arrive and set up their school in an old building she owns to teach the black people of the town where he family has owned land for decades. She is met with bigotry and bile, as she attempts to give the children an education they have been denied for generations. While fighting the towns’ leaders and citizens for the right to teach, her life is turned upside down as she finds and then mends a broken and beaten Sam. They develop an unlikely and potentially dangerous physical and emotional relationship that feeds the flames of ignorance and fear in the town’s people. Sam knows he must continue on his journey to find his Tilda, but is reluctant to leave Pru at such a critical and volatile time. He does continue on his way, while unbeknownst to him, Prudence must battle demons beyond what she has ever imagined, leaving her empty and missing Sam and then dealing with the brutal murder of so many of her students and others in the town, including her beloved “sister” Bonnie.

As Sam, limps on, Tilda and her master, Jim McFarland, an evil vile man, are at a confederate compound out west. She has been beaten down, raped and tormented. Very little of the Tilda that Sam remembers remains with her, she is broken and has lost all hope in life. While being held at the compound, she sneaks out and walks into a lake, hoping to end all her earthly

suffering. Shortly after her *attempt* at ending her life, she is given hope anew. Sam, her Sam, the man she had loved, the father of her only child, the man she had taught to read and write, and the man who betrayed her, had finally come back for her, but where would they go.

Tilda and Sam are able to escape the compound, but do not get very far before McFarland is hot on their trail. Tilda and Sam share what has happened to the other during their separation. Not very much territory is traversed before McFarland ambushes them and a fight ensues. Sam shoots McFarland dead but not before being wounded in the process. Sam directs Tilda to take him back to Pru so she can get him to a doctor. They arrive and Pru, still healing from the horror of the past months, takes Sam under her care and attempts to dress and clean his wound. His body fights the infection while his mind travels back to happier times. He relives memories when he and Tilda are reading together, loving each other and dreaming of their future. He dreams of Tilda reading the bible to him and quoting verses from 2 Corinthians, “love is patient, it does not boast, it does not envy....love never fails”. Tilda, holding him close says the words he most wishes to hear, “Love never fails”, and these are the words that take him off to eternity, to a place of forgiveness, his forgiveness.

I have been changed on my journey as well. Although I have never considered myself as a racist, I have kept myself distanced from the suffering of the blacks who endured such unspeakable horror at the hands of another race. More questions arose from this novel than answers. Would I have been able to accept a black man who could read and write as well as I could? Would I have been Prudence who rallied for equal education for white and black men and women? My love of the written word and most especially of God’s written word has given me the answers I need to live my life in respect of ALL men, white or black, red or yellow. For HIS word clearly states, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that

whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life". John 3:16. If God does not discriminate about whom he wants in heaven, then who are we, his creation, to judge for him.

For when all is said and all is done, Love never fails.