

Review of *House of Clouds*
Author:
KI Thompson
Review by Ann Bannon
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In her first novel, writer KI Thompson has ventured into well-trodden ground—the American Civil War—and made it fresh and fascinating all over again. Her story is set in the dying days of the Antebellum South and the early months of the war, when no-one could quite believe it was really happening and some people were still uncertain as to which side they were on.

If you think you've heard it all before, you haven't. This isn't just the Blue Coats vs. Johnny Reb, the drum-and-bugle-corps history we are so familiar with. This is the consequences of war as played out in the disrupted and chaotic lives of the women of that era. We have a delicately lovely Southern girl, Laura St. Clair, gently bred and passionately pro-South; it is her whole world, everything she knows. Her generosity and sweet nature are legend in her Virginia neighborhood near Richmond and her father is an influential member of the Virginia legislature. But she cannot see the smoldering resentment among her black servants—or, seeing, cannot make sense of it. On the other hand, we have a spirited, handsome, energetic young actress from the North whose sympathies, like those of her journalist father, are with the North and with the constitutional ideals of freedom for all mankind; slavery to her is anathema. Each woman has a brother in uniform, and worse, the young men are classmates from West Point and warm friends.

The actress, Jordan Colfax, is a familiar face in Richmond, where she has been well received in Shakespearean plays in the years before the war. But when she is enlisted as a spy for President Lincoln, she meets the St. Clairs, realizes they are a goldmine of information about Southern strategies, and does some dangerous sleuthing in their home, Barrett Hall. One of the treasures she didn't expect to find is a fiery passion for Laura, the elegant young heiress who lives there, already unhappily promised to a kindly widower.

One is reminded of what a repressed and cautious time this was; how very little women knew about sexuality, particularly their own; and how rarely anyone ever spoke of such matters. Few women were gainfully employed. They were supported by men—husbands, fathers, a brother and his family—or they were destitute. It was still scandalous that a woman might make her living

on the stage—and this, two centuries after Charles II of England made it not only legal, but mandatory, that women play women's parts in the theater! It was even worse that one woman should look at another with desire so strong that it shone in her glowing face and bright eyes, yet could not be named. It was an incendiary mix.

The mid-nineteenth century was a time when speech, manners, dress, and behavior were all more formal than we are used to now. Thompson does a splendid job of weaving this ceremoniousness into the story line without for a moment losing the forward momentum and excitement of her narrative.

The novel is deeply and exactly researched; one feels one is in good hands all the way through. But the author's knowledge, always so rich and detailed that we know she could easily have doubled the length of her book, enlivens rather than impedes her story-telling powers. The story rolls along like the great Potomac with a narrative flow which carries the reader to a warmly satisfying conclusion. The title, by the way, comes from an ardently tender poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who knew what tumultuous love felt like.

This is a lovely romance. It has the inevitability of a well-structured novel and the emotional delight of a troubadour's tale one wants to hear again and again. With her first novel, KI Thompson has entered the community of "ink-stained wretches" who enchant us all with stories well-told. Welcome, Ms. Thompson, to the ranks of the writers. I look forward to your next book.