

The Good Lord Bird (2020)



Ethan Hawke dominates the screen as the crazed Abolitionist John Brown.

(c) Amazon Studios

Ethan Hawke has the role of his life as fiery Abolitionist John Brown in this tongue in cheek mini-series that he created and helped produce and write. We know at the outset that this isn't pure history when, before the title we read, "All of this is true. Most of it happened." Indeed, the story is narrated by a fictional character, the 12-year-old slave Henry Shackelford (Joshua Caleb Johnson), whom Brown sets free during a fiery encounter with Kansas "Red Shirts." The "true" part comes from James McBride's National Book Award-winning novel of the same name, on which the series based. The series' title refers to the ivory-billed woodpecker, the feathers of which Brown and his sons believe bring good luck. (How wrong can you be?!)

The story, dwelling on the last three years of Brown's life, begins with Brown getting his haircut in a saloon. Henry's enslaved father, the barber and preacher, and the customer are exchanging Scripture passages when Red Shirter Dutch Henry Sherman (David Morse) enters. Under his questioning the customer reveals that he is the notorious killer Abolitionist John Brown. During their exchange of gunfire, the barber is killed, and Henry taken away by the escaping Brown. At his

hideout with his sons and gang members Brown thinks he hears Henry respond that his name is Henrietta, so he dresses the boy in girl's clothing. He gives him his good luck charm, a dried-up onion, which the hungry Henry thinks is meant for food. The boy eats it, and after recovering from the surprise, Brown dubs him "Little Onion."

Brown declares that Little Onion is freed, but Henry himself feels just as enslaved as ever, now to a murderous White man who forces him to ride with the gang and to witness unspeakable acts of barbaric violence against slavers. One such incident is especially heart-rending: Brown's gang invades a Red Shirt man's cabin, drags the man away from his crying wife and children, and despite pleas for mercy, cuts off his head.

Thus, this is not a series for the squeamish. Though there is considerable humor and irony, this portrait of Brown as a crazed Bible-quoting (who often garbles his quotes) butcherer illuminates the dark story of the background of the Civil War. Henry is only interested in getting away and finding whatever personal happiness possible to a colored man, but Brown forces him to participate, or, given the belief that his charge is a girl, at least to be a witness to his violent crusade. All the supporting cast are excellent, but Hawke dominates every scene, convincing us that though Brown's belief that Blacks should be freed, his madness prevented him from seeing that the methods of his "gunfighters of the Gospel" were horrible. And yet also, though a crazed fanatic, he perceived as many Abolitionists did not, that no compromise was possible between the advocates of slavery and those of freedom.

I have as of this writing seen just the first episode, but know that other historical figures will be making their appearance—in addition to Jeb Stuart, whom we have already met, there will be Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Stonewall Jackson, and John Wilkes Booth. I am especially looking forward to how the two Black Abolitionists will be

portrayed. These two were said to have admired Brown and supported him but did not become caught up in his ill-fated raid on the armory at Harper's Ferry.

Brown's belief that slaves would rise up in revolt at news of his invasion of Virginia proved ill-founded, costing him and his accomplices their lives. But scant two or so years after his execution, Union soldiers marching into battle sang, "John Brown's body lies a mouldering in the grave." ! And they were right when they sang the chorus—in this riveting performance by Ethan Hawke, "His soul is marching on"!

This review will be in the November issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion, with several other, if not all, episodes covered.

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