



## The Amalgamation Polka

*Stephen Wright*

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## The Amalgamation Polka Stephen Wright

Hailed by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as "a bright star in the literary sky," Stephen Wright now extends his astonishing accomplishment with a Civil War novel unlike any other.

Born in 1844 in bucolic upstate New York, Liberty Fish is the son of fervent abolitionists as well as the grandson of Carolina slaveholders even more dedicated to their cause. Thus follows a childhood limned with fugitive slaves moving through hidden passageways in the house, his Uncle Potter's free-soil adventure stories whose remarkable violence sets the tone of the mounting national crisis, and the inevitable distress that befalls his mother whenever letters arrive from her parents-- a conflict that ultimately costs her her life and compels Liberty, in hopes of reconciling the familial disunion, to escape first into the cauldron of war and then into a bedlam more disturbing still.

Rich in characters both heartbreakng and bloodcurdling, comic and horrific, *The Amalgamation Polka* is shot through with politics and dreams, and it captures great swaths of the American experience, from village to metropolis to plantation, from the Erie Canal to the Bahamas, from Bloody Kansas to the fulfillment of the killing fields. Yet for all the brutality and tragedy, this novel is exuberant in the telling and its wide compassion, brimming with the language, manners, hopes, and fears of its time-- all of this so transformed by Stephen Wright's imaginative compass that places and events previously familiar are rendered new and strange, terrifying and stirring. Instantly revelatory, constantly mesmerizing, this is the work of a major writer at the top of his form.

## The Amalgamation Polka Details

Date : Published February 14th 2006 by Alfred A. Knopf (first published 2006)

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Author : Stephen Wright

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## From Reader Review The Amalgamation Polka for online ebook

### Adam says

Like the similarly named deadpan comic the author Wright is bizarre, comic, grotesque, and sometimes beautiful and brilliant. Written in dense sometimes stunning prose with the ability to switch from slapstick to profundity and tragedy without jarring the tone and mood, Wright examines the incredibly important years before and during America's civil war without reducing it to banalities seemingly acted out by museum reenactors that a lot examinations of the era proffer us. Our failed revolution with regards to the crime of slavery haunts this book, the tragedy that reached a crescendo with those years but still continues as an undercurrent in our day and age. Wright is a profoundly American writer that we should be proud of, continuing a tradition of such American masters(though reviewers have noted a similarity to English authors Carroll and Conrad (via Poland) which I concur with) Melville and Twain through Pynchon(who provides a blurb), Delillo, and McCarthy (most resembling him in an appropriately apocalyptic rendering of the battle of Antietam) he ponders national questions of our legacy and nature with powerful language and purpose, but also manages to be funny and readable.

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### Louis says

Mes contacts avec Stephen Wright sont le fruit du hasard. Il y a vingt ans, mon ami Pierre Lemieux m'avait incité à m'abonner au Quality Paperback Book Club, où l'un de mes premiers achats fut *Going Native*, un recueil de nouvelles déguisé en roman, choisi dans la liste sur un coup de tête, lu, apprécié, puis oublié. Puis, cet automne, Hélène m'accompagnait dans une de mes expéditions au 3e étage du Bonenfant quand elle a choisi, un peu au hasard, un roman de la collection «Du monde entier» de Gallimard, *États sauvages*. Le nom de l'auteur ne me disait rien... jusqu'à ce que je voie le titre de la version originale. J'ai mis la main sur la v.o. de ce roman-ci, traduit en français sous le titre *La polka des bâtards*. Relativement court (323 pages), ce livre se déguste lentement, pour apprécier la verve littéraire d'un grand écrivain méconnu qui raconte le périple de Liberty Fish, dont la mère, dégoûtée de l'esclavage, a fui la plantation familiale en Caroline pour épouser un abolitionniste new-yorkais. Vient alors la Guerre de sécession, qui transportera Liberty des absurdes charniers aux non moins absurdes expériences génétiques de son grand-père. Si plusieurs ont loué avec raison la puissance descriptive des scènes de bataille, je retiendrai surtout le voyage proto-touristique sur le canal Érié et le point d'orgue que constitue la rencontre avec un grand-père qui essaie obstinément de se prouver qu'il a raison au milieu des ruines de son empire. Quatre étoiles et demie.

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### Maduck831 says

It's a boy," Aroline declared flatly, thrusting into dramatic view a wailing, wriggling, shimmery thing of mottled red and blue that Roxana recognized instantly as a glistening piece of her own heart." (15) "One idle afternoon, several months after Liberty's passing under the tutelage of Ma'am L'Orange, Thatcher – curious as to the health of his son's academic life – inquired casually, "Who is the president of the United States?" / "Jesus Christ," Liberty promptly answered. / Father looked at Mother. Mother looked at Father. Liberty never saw Ma'am L'Orange again." (35) "Took a new missus recently, so I hear." / "Yes sir, indeed I did." / "Comely women, I expect." / "Yes, Captain Whelkington, she surely is. Why do you ask?" / "Because I am to fuck her from stern to stern soon as I get done tanning your scrawny hide." (72) "After a couple of

reiterations, alert observers noted with amusement that the oaths “God Almighty!” “Jesus Christ!” and “Judas Priest!” were, in fact, the actual names of Red’s animules.” (75) “...and as Eben hastily turned the carriage out onto the Boynton Road the head seemed to turn, too, watching her from its vacant sockets, and Roxana began to scream and there was nothing Eben could do about it, there was nothing anyone could do, this was the world, her world, and her cries the sound of Roxana being born, however belatedly into it.” (133) “So however much the decision pained her, she believed that allowing Liberty the freedom to go when he wished might assure that he would also come back when he wished.” (151) “Maybe now, after all this bloodletting,” said Liberty hopefully, “it will finally end.” (190) “Cherish the past, no matter how bitter, he remembered hearing his mother declaim, therein lies the gate to future freedom.” (229) “Well, there are not many in this confounding existence who truly understand the different between right and wrong.” / “You understand nothing.” (276) “No short commons on this vessel,” replied Wallace proudly. “Please, everyone, take your seats. I’m sure you’re all familiar with the wearisome notion of our earth as a prison and we its inhabitants as condemned inmates who can never be certain when the man in the black hood is going to come knocking on the door. Well, if this be so, why fritter away our brief sojourn in funks and humours? Eat! Drink! Celebrate!” He raised the first of what would be numerous glasses of French wine.” (282) “How can anyone know for certain?” argued Liberty. “Blood flows across time like water, going where it wants, when it wants, without respect to boundaries geographical, physical or social. Tributaries converge, branch, reconverge in a pattern that may not be so random as it appears. Life, I suppose, and ultimately it makes mongrels of us all.” (311)

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### **Ellis says**

This book was pretty annoying to me. I sort of glossed over the beginning of the book because nothing seemed to grab my attention. The protagonist’s parents were involved in the Underground Railroad, and, early on, I thought that was what this book would be about. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Instead, this fine young man, Liberty Fish, joined the Union army when he was almost 17. Apparently, this was done because of his great desire to bring the slaves their due freedom.

After Liberty had been in the war for a couple of weeks he took off on foot to go meet his Slaving grandparents. Now, when Liberty’s mother was a young lady she couldn’t stand to be with her family any more (on account of her repulsion to slavery) and she left them, never to have any contact with them again. Her family did have slaves and they were bad people, but when Liberty met his aged grandparents, they had morphed into an entirely different kind of monsters. Liberty’s grandfather was a self-proclaimed “Niggerologist”, and his grandmother was the type of high-class lady that would cut the palm her house slave’s hand if she brought the wrong food for dinner. Basically, after Liberty meets his grandparents, the story takes a real nose dive. Supposedly, Liberty went to war based on his morals and his integrity, but once with his grandparents he seemed only a little annoyed when observing slave torture and voiced no objection to his grandfathers repeated rape of many generations of his own part-slave children/grandchildren, etc., in his effort to breed the black out of the Black. As the plot thickens with his grandparents, rather than lift a finger to help any one of the slaves, Liberty developed the habit of only making snide and sarcastic comments about his grandfather’s vile acts toward the slaves. All in all, Liberty proved to be a character very difficult to respect, like, or empathize with.

This book did have some sections that I liked: the part of the story with Liberty’s parents in it, and, well, I guess that’s about it. I was going to give this book two stars since the book had some parts I liked, but on second thought, I hated so much of the book that I can’t stand to give it any more stars than I have to. In case I wasn’t clear, I don’t recommend this book.

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## Rick says

The most recent novel by a gifted writer, *The Amalgamation Polka* channels Mark Twain with mixed results. There are brilliant set pieces and bizarre misfires, particularly at the end. Wonderfully rich dialogue and descriptions—you can't beat the opening sentence: "The bearded ladies were dancing in the mud."—but a sense that all characters share the same speechwriter. Freedom Fish is the son of a daughter of the South who, because of her abolitionist-leanings, fled north as a teenager. Roxana and Thatcher, a northern non-conformist in his own right, raise Freedom to be an independent thinker. When the Civil War comes, Freedom joins up, in part to take a personal journey to his mother's ancestral homeland and visit her estranged parents.

What works wonderfully well is a trip on the Erie Canal that Freedom and Thatcher take together, a flashback to Roxana's childhood on her parent's South Carolina plantation (named Redemption Hall), Freedom's military service before his going AWOL to pursue his personal mission, including some Civil War battle scenes worthy of Crane and Bierce, and a small scene between Freedom and a woman in Georgia that is rich with compassion and restraint.

The major misfire is prolonged and comes in the novel's final third, when Freedom improbably arrives at his grandparents' plantation and becomes his crazy grandfather's shadow, accompanying him on tours of his decrepit grounds. The grandfather, not really recognizable as the same character we met earlier in the book, has become not just crueler, but a Southern Dr. Mengle, and a loquaciously deranged clown.

Freedom, though, is the real problem. He is too aloof and passive an observer of direct cruelty while evidencing an inability to resist responding to any racist language. So he will instantly call his grandfather out for using the word "nigger," but simply watch him carry out his bizarre experiments, siring children on his slave children for example. He's appalled mind you but seems more comfortable with his newly met grandparents, even though their letters also seemed to torture his beloved mother to suicide, than he is uncomfortable with their actions. This paradoxical posture in some sense seems the point, but if it is, it is far from convincing. If the author didn't make Freedom desert and head south as some sort of destiny fulfillment you wouldn't believe any living creature that fits the description of Freedom would behave as he does. Like Huck Finn he is a kind of innocent; unlike Huck Finn he doesn't appear to be a real person, just an author's imaginary vehicle for unclear meaning.

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## Derek says

A largely successful but imperfect historical novel, *The Amalgamation Polka* offered a colorful and convincingly violent portrait of a Union soldier's journey "home" during the American Civil War. The plot was an interesting one, relaying the protagonist's (groaningly named Liberty) abandonment of his soldierly duties and his efforts to locate the Southern slave-owning grandparents he never knew. The author's voice, leaden with appositives that stretch sentences to the length of paragraphs and paragraphs to the length of pages, draws much attention to itself, sometimes at the expense of the book.

The author's verbosity works better when describing landscapes or portraying the vernacular of the time, but when describing the characters' feelings, it feels false and showy. Their thoughts become so mired in the

presentation that one gets the impression that Stephen Wright is enamored with the sound of his own voice and his characters merely offer a means to use it. And that's not entirely unjustified; Wright absolutely has a gift for detail and memorable turns of phrase. But too often it feels like he's going for memorable before convincing, and I think the emotional impact of the story might have been more strongly felt if Wright kept the average syllable count a little lower and seasoned less frequently with excessive commas.

The book's strongest feature is that it earnestly attempts to explore the complexity of wartime racial tension. Wright looks at the issue from the staunch Northern abolitionism of Liberty's parents as well as the ludicrous reasoning of his slave-owning grandparents, clearly and rightly presenting the former as the morally justifiable position. Some time is also given to the Northern anti-abolitionist point of view and the foreigner's abstained one via the two ship captains Liberty meets over the course of the book. It's hard to say if Wright achieves what he sets out to do, though, because the message becomes so muddled by the book's third half.

Liberty's arrival at his grandparents' decaying plantation starts off promisingly, as Maury walks him through his perverse experiments like a grotesque Eugenics house of horrors. But Wright exchanges verisimilitude for shock, and Liberty's steadfast refusal to act or react to what he sees leaves the reader perplexed. Wright, ever so briefly, dabbles in allegory, as Liberty struggles to save Maury's ridiculously named Slavery in a room of all white. It paints an interesting picture, sure, but the message becomes unclear because Liberty seems to acquiesce to so much of his grandfather's demands. It's a strange way to end the book and it doesn't seem to be in keeping with the author's beautiful portrayal of Liberty's experiences in the war and the memorable passages detailing his mother's abandonment of the plantation.

Kudos should be given for Wright's surprising veiled mention of the Confederados, even if it is a little anachronistic. *The Amalgamation Polka* is a good book, but the series of flaws that come at its conclusion keep it from being a great book.

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### **Cheryl Gatling says**

It has been said by a number of people that the institution of slavery damages everyone involved in it. The slaves, obviously, are brutalized, but slave-owners suffer, too, whether they recognize it or not, for they must become brutes, and lose their humanity. This book is, among other things, an illustration of the long reach of the many-tentacled institution of slavery, destroying lives willy-nilly. Roxana Maury is the daughter of a South Carolina plantation. She doesn't have the stomach for it. She disowns her family and marries a Northern abolitionist. But she never breaks free from the bitter accusations of her family. Letters from home trigger days of weeping. Roxana and Thatcher's son, Liberty Fish, is raised in upstate New York, deep in all the most liberal ideas of the day. When the Civil War breaks out, he goes off to fight for the Union. While he is fighting in Georgia, he learns that his mother has died in a possible suicide, and he seeks to gain something (understanding? closure?) by wandering off and visiting the old family plantation. There he learns that his grandfather is mad, certifiably looney, and torturing his slaves in medical experiments in attempts to turn them white. Grandfather Maury reacts to the approaching Union army by running away, and by taking Liberty with him.

That is the plot of the book. But this is not a plot-driven book. It is a series of wild vignettes, over-the-top with color and bombast. Little Liberty meets a pirate in the woods. Uncle Potter fights in the Kansas Troubles. Liberty and Thatcher ride a packet boat on the Erie Canal. Uncle Potter and Liberty see the sights in New York City. Some of these scenes advance the story. Some just seem to describe the tumultuous mix of ideas and bigger-than-life characters that populate the age. And the language. Oh, the language! Perhaps

the first thing I noticed about this book is that it sure has a lot of words in it. It is a rare noun that doesn't have its adjective, and sometimes two, and occasionally three. And no character is going to use a plain, simple word if he can find a multi-syllabic substitute, or better yet, a bit of slang. According to what is being taught about writing these days, when a spare, lean prose is considered strong, this is entirely wrong. Yet all of those many words are chosen with precision. You can see every scene and every character with complete clarity (even things you would maybe rather not see). The jacket blurb says that this wordiness is an imitation of period style, and that may be. There is a little bit of Dickens about it, a little, perhaps, from what I remember, James Fenimore Cooper.

One of the second things I noticed about this book is that it is funny. When Liberty is afraid to sleep alone in his new bedroom, his mother comforts him by bringing him a plate of cookies-- in the shape of chained slaves. There is a lot of such absurdity and craziness. But there is also a lot of dark grotesquerie. During the first part of the book I read slowly to savor the language. Toward the end I couldn't wait to get away from the evil grandfather. But that's the problem. The Civil War will not be over when the shooting stops. The conflict will go on. The grandfather tells Liberty that he may think he is on the other side, but the slave-holding Maury's are a part of him. When the master dies, Liberty tells one old slave that he is free now, and the old man points at his head, and says, "But he is still alive in here." The "amalgamation" of the title is the mixing of the races, and the polka the choppy dance it is to be. Is there no hope? Well, yes, actually, there is. But that is all I will say.

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### **Charlaralotte says**

Another great story along the lines of "The History of the Known World," though a bit less tremendously depressing. Well-researched story of family in North with ties to the South and horrors of Civil War. Started a bit slowly, though once Liberty & his father take a trip up the Erie Canal, there's great pleasure in the details of travel, strange characters met en route, wonderful descriptions of diversions of the time period.

Liberty's experiences on the battlefield not weighed down by usual tired metaphors. Excellent descriptions of what might actually have transpired. Trip to Redemption Hall picked up speed & writer definitely on a roll. Excellently crafted absurdist conversations (similar to excellent descriptions of mother's early life).

Ultimately not so sure that Northern bits are as strong as they could be, given absolute brilliance of Southern bits. Nevertheless, very well done.

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### **Pris robichaud says**

Both the Real Thing and A Merciless Parody, 1 Feb 2007

"Wright's title refers to a racist editorial cartoon of the period, which depicted "an amalgamation polka," where whites and blacks dance together in genteel costumes. This was meant to suggest, one presumes, that other mutually enjoyable physical activities might occur between the races later in the evening. Race mixing

was the great shibboleth of slavery advocates and segregationists from the dawn of American history almost to our own time and many of the characters in Wright's novel are obsessed with it." Andrew O'Hehir

Stephen Wright is one of my favorite authors. I was introduced to him by my best friend who recommended his book "Going Native". I read this book in almost one sitting ten months ago but left the last chapter until now. I wanted to be able to leave the last chapter for a time when I needed solace and understanding. Who else will tell you that our country is screwed, always has been and always will be. Who else, as in most of his novels, infers that this 'is both the real thing and a merciless parody'? And, who else writes such marvelous prose? Exactly, maybe no one.

Liberty Fish, yes that is his real name, grows up in a house used as a station on the Underground Railroad, but his mother was raised on a large South Carolina plantation and his father is the son of a Northern industrial family that has profited greatly from the slave trade. Liberty's parents want to destroy the institution that made their families rich, and this perversity runs through the book. When Liberty visits the devastated Redemption Hall, his mother's birthplace, and meets his maternal grandfather, Asa Maury, the old man is a bitter, angry, hardened bigot. Yet, faced with the destruction of slavery, he is facing the racial dilemma, and is trying to solve it. Liberty survives the horrors of war at Antietam. He is taken prisoner by the rebels, then deserts from the Union Army to go find grandfather Asa. There he works with his grandfather to escape the collapsing Confederacy and hijack a ship for Brazil, where slavery remains alive and well. This harkens us back to Liberty's childhood where he is educated by a one-eyed former slave named Euclid, taken carousing by his Uncle Potter and sworn into the secret fraternity of pirates by a strange character Fife. Where does this all take us? That journey, my friend, is for you take.

Stephen Wright may see bloodshed and tumult of the Civil War period as good examples of our American madness. Despite the parody or maybe because of it, Stephen Wright gives us a new vocabulary, 'sheconnery', 'buckra, and 'gallinipers'. Fitting words for the occasion. What do they mean? You decide.

One of the characters, a southern lady sums this book up the best 'This war,'" she says to Liberty, "'this horrible evil war, it's never going to end. You do understand that, don't you? Even after it's over it will continue to go on without the flags and the trumpets and the armies, do you understand?'

There is so much to say about this novel. Stephen Wright may be having as much difficulty as we are in understanding what is happening in our world today, but he is able to articulate his thoughts in remarkable prose. I do not have the words to express the mastery of Stephen Wright's prose, nor will I try. Suffice it to say that he has led Liberty to the conclusion that "Life ... makes mongrels of us all." So Very, Very Highly Recommended.

prisrob 1-25-07

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## Ruth says

323 pages.

Race relations before and during the civil war.

Hailed by the San Francisco Chronicle as "a bright star in the literary sky," Stephen Wright now extends his astonishing accomplishment with a Civil War novel unlike any other.

Born in 1844 in bucolic upstate New York, Liberty Fish is the son of fervent abolitionists as well as the grandson of Carolina slaveholders even more dedicated to their cause. Thus follows a childhood limned with fugitive slaves moving through hidden passageways in the house, his Uncle Potter's free-soil adventure stories whose remarkable violence sets the tone of the mounting national crisis, and the inevitable distress that befalls his mother whenever letters arrive from her parents—a conflict that ultimately costs her her life and compels Liberty, in hopes of reconciling the familial disunion, to escape first into the cauldron of war and then into a bedlam more disturbing still.

Rich in characters both heartbreakng and bloodcurdling, comic and horrific, *The Amalgamation Polka* is shot through with politics and dreams, and it captures great swaths of the American experience, from village to metropolis to plantation, from the Erie Canal to the Bahamas, from Bloody Kansas to the fulfillment of the killing fields. Yet for all the brutality and tragedy, this novel is exuberant in the telling and its wide compassion, brimming with the language, manners, hopes, and fears of its time—all of this so transformed by Stephen Wright's imaginative compass that places and events previously familiar are rendered new and strange, terrifying and stirring. Instantly revelatory, constantly mesmerizing, this is the work of a major writer at the top of his form.

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### **Alia S says**

A random read: I pulled it off the library shelf for its title, kept it for the cover art and the Civil War setting. The story was engaging but the writing is intolerable. "Be prepared for a lot of rereading," warns the jacket copy, "due to the vibrant beauty and savory brilliance of every paragraph." What? I don't know what all these gushing reviewers are talking about: Rushdie is "rich"; Wright is overwrought; Diaz is "idiosyncratic"; Wright's just a dude with a thesaurus and tendency to ornament every sentence that'll sit still long enough to take on a few more clauses for decoration.

This book also features terrible dialect and battle scenes like a Warner Brothers cartoon. Nope.

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### **Curt Buchmeier says**

This is "an acquired taste" read, I'm pretty sure. Started out rather slowly; for me the first 75 pages I'd guess. Once the hero, Liberty Fish (I know; that's his name), takes a trip on a boat as a young boy with his father down the Erie Canal to an abolitionist meeting, at which point Wright does a masterful job with dialogue and setting and the plot picks up significantly. Wright's style and pacing are unique, humorous and familiar all at the same time. This was my first read of Stephen Wright and it was a literary *deja vu* for some reason. It may have been due to the fact that this is an adventure story along the lines of *Huck Finn*, *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Wizard of Oz*. The hero strikes out from the safety and security of home and struggles desperately to return. Of course, the story is not about the return but the dangers and strangers and life-changing events that are encountered along the way. This adventure, however, uses the dueling spectres of death and slavery against the back drop of the American Civil War in a rather different, not for the faint of heart, sort of way. It would seem to me the book was as well researched as it was well written. Once Ft Sumpter falls, we are following young Liberty, leaving home at 16 to enlist in the Union Army, through several battles, his capture by the CSA and his escape; we follow his odyssey as he decides to visit his slave-owning, never met but often talked about, maternal grandparents at their plantation in South Carolina(Gramps is a real piece of work); and his running of a US Naval Blockade to get to the Caribbean. Hell of a story; I laughed and I

groaned in several places. Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed it. Stephen Wright has a new fan and I will be picking up more of his books. I recommend others give him a read if you haven't already.

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### **Elaine says**

Stephen Wright is, if not THE best, certainly one of THE best 21st century writers. His verbal pyrotechnics amaze. You hear, smell, see, and feel what is going on, both through a child's sensory input, and then an adult's. At other times, he allows you to sit back and just listen and watch.

The plot takes place between the 1840's through The Civil War, which is presented both through Northern and Southern eyes. People often think of that war starting with the firing upon Fort Sumter, but the fighting actually began twenty or so years before when the Kansas-Nebraska territories began readying to become states. The South was determined that all new territories would allow slavery and The North was equally determined that they would not. It was not only the relative handful of Abolitionists who wanted to exclude slavery. It was the working man and settler-farmers who could not compete with slave labor. Some Northern states even had statutes prohibiting blacks from being within their borders! Wright doesn't say this, but he does have a character who partakes of the fighting against the pukes (people who want to extend slavery) If you're looking for another *Gone With the Wind*, this is not it. It is the days of slavery as seen by those who abhorred it as a sin.

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### **Jenny says**

The tone in this is quite uneven, starting as a humorous and richly-detailed coming of age tale, transitioning into a more straight-forward Civil War narrative, and then going off the rails in the last 100 pages in a grotesque depiction of a fallen southern plantation family. Despite the unevenness, I was happy to go along for the journey up until that last third because of the beauty and inventiveness of the author's use of language. My attention strayed in the last few chapters, though, because not only was the material grotesque, which I'm okay with if it's done well, but it felt false. There's no way this story could've ended entirely happily, but still, I don't think the ending it possesses is the true one. It felt labored and I had hard time engaging with it because it seemed like the author was putting down what he wanted to happen rather than listening to the work to find out what should happen.

At any rate, I'm happy to have read this because the parts that were good were very good and I found myself marking things that I particularly liked on almost every page. It was also written by a former literature professor of mine whose book of short stories I read a few years ago and didn't like that much, so I'm happy to have been exposed to a piece of his work that I appreciate more. It makes me interested to check out some of his older stuff that I hadn't bothered to pick up.

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### **Jason says**

Absolutely stunning novel. Why I have put off reading it so long would perplex, if not for the somewhat dubious title and the general abundance of books ever penetrating my sphere. I truly believe that Wright's *Going Native* is one of the very greatest American post-war novels, especially of the relatively unsung variety. The *Amalgamation Polka* resembles it not a jot, save its also being eminently American. It is a novel

of horror, beauty, and great robust humor. Imagine if Mark Twain had written *The Red Badge of Courage*. The section that renders civil war battle is both nauseating and mesmerizing; I am not sure I have ever read battle captured so ineluctably. The language is informed very much by the period (not just the dialogue); this is at times prose-making as high-wire act. One might be inclined to invoke Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* if not for the fact that we are dealing here w/ something far more compact and totally moving. The dénouement is especially commendable for its breadth of emotion. I have no idea what Wright has been working on since 2006 but I await few thing w/ nary the excitement.

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### **Tom says**

An unusual book, not in the plot or story, but in the vocabulary used. It was both fun and frustrating to sift through the unusual "amalgamation" of words.

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### **Caryn says**

hard book to get into.

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### **Tung says**

The latest novel from the author of *Meditations in Green* (my top book of the year for 2003), this book is based on a picture drawn during the 1800s that shows African-American men dancing with high society white women with the caption "The Amalgamation Polka". But this book is less about one picture, and more about America during the Civil War and its struggle with the issue of slavery. The novel focuses on Liberty Fish, the son of abolitionists, and it traces his time as a youth growing up in a house that served as part of the Underground Railroad to his entry into the Civil War to his journey to South Carolina to meet his slave-owning grandparents whom he'd never seen before and to confront his own heritage's experience with slavery (his mother fled the South because she was morally disgusted by the behavior of her parents). The prose in this novel is very different from the stylistic flair that I've seen in other Wright novels (see the subsequent reviews for *Going Native* and *M31: A Family Romance*); this novel is told rather straightforwardly. But like the other Wright novels, the prose is technically and aesthetically breathtaking. The atmosphere and detail of this novel reminded me a lot of *Cold Mountain* and *The Known World*, while the dialogue was reminiscent of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The ending gets a little sloppy with some scenes that seemed rather irrelevant, but other than that, I rank it right up there with my other favorite Civil War novels of all time. Highly recommended.

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### **Wu Ming says**

**WM4:** "Le donne barbute ballavano nel fango". Sembra il verso di un pezzo punk rock, invece è l'attacco di *Amalgamation Polka* (Einaudi Stile Libero, euro 16,50), quarto romanzo dell'eclettico Stephen Wright e già caso letterario negli Stati Uniti. Incipit straniante per un titolo ancora più strambo, tratto da una vignetta satirica di metà Ottocento che rappresenta la danza dei bianchi abolizionisti insieme ai neri vestiti a festa. Sì, perché il romanzo parla del conflitto politico che ha spaccato l'America segnando la sua seconda nascita,

ottant'anni dopo la Rivoluzione. Quella rivoluzione che aveva proclamato l'uguaglianza degli uomini, ma lasciato aperto il problema della schiavitù.

Il pensiero non può non andare a un altro bel romanzo recente che torna a raccontare l'epopea della Guerra di Secessione americana, *La marcia* di E. L. Doctorow, del quale *Amalgamation Polka* potrebbe essere l'indiretto controcanto. Tuttavia Stephen Wright - veterano del Vietnam, cappellino NY, orecchino, piercing al labbro e al naso - sorprende con una visionarietà degna di Tim Burton o dei fratelli Coen. Sul New York Times, Laura Miller ha fatto notare come sia proprio l'imprevedibilità a distinguere questo libro da molti altri romanzi storici: Wright dribbla il limite del genere - ovvero il fatto che la storia è nota e si sa già come va a finire - e ci conduce attraverso un territorio inesplorato, incontro ai tipi umani più stravaganti. A tratti divertente, a tratti tragicamente cruento, *Amalgamation Polka* è una miscela tra il romanzo di formazione e quello *on the road*, la storia di un viaggio attraverso la matrice fraticida della guerra civile. La più cruenta perché combattuta tra Caino e Abele, dentro le famiglie, nelle viscere del Grande Paese che tutto fagocita. "...Siamo i grandi divoratori." - sentenzia uno dei personaggi, - "Divoriamo l'esperienza, divoriamo la geografia, divoriamo il tempo, ci divoriamo anche fra di noi. Una nazione di appetiti sfrenati, non c'è nessun dubbio in proposito."

[La recensione prosegue qui: <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/Giap/nandropau...> ]

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### **Brian Kim says**

Okay. I can pinpoint where this book went wrong for me. When you name a mulatto character **SLAVERY** and place her in a room completely painted **WHITE** where she has been held captive all her life by her slave master who is also her father, and she is being forced to have sex with a white man named **LIBERTY** in order to rid her body further of black skin color and this all takes place in a plantation called **REDEMPTION HALL**, where **LIBERTY** ends up not having sex with her but attempts to **FREE** her... Yeah. Way to be subtle on the symbolism. We get it. Also, the last paragraph is startlingly naive compared to the rest of the book ("Then he remembered... It's America, and everything was going to be fine" -- deep). Certain stylistic choices Wright makes (such as the frequently hyper-educated dialogue) pulled me out of the moment, and the final third of the book is generally a mess. Which is a shame, because the exposition moves well and the narration during Civil War battle scenes is sometimes amazing.

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