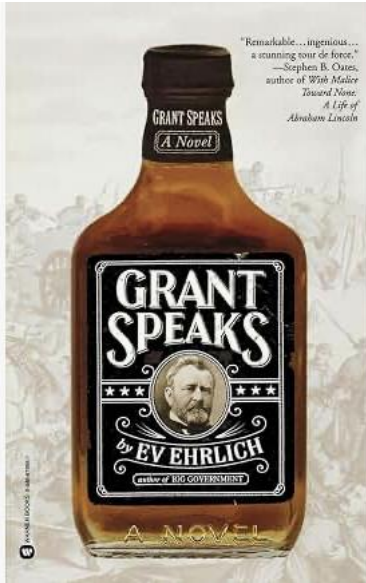




Book Review: *Grant Speaks* by Ev Ehrlich

Reviewed by Curtis Jerry Smothers

Civil War history buffs should buy this book immediately. *Grant Speaks* has all the drama and force of Grant's original memoirs, but none of the antiquated dryness that can make older literature a chore to read.

Ev Ehrlich takes playful literary license with Grant's life, introducing an ironic twist of identity that speaks to our shared humanity—and to the roles of fate, chance, and personal choice in shaping our lives. In the end, Ehrlich suggests, we are all products of both circumstance and the decisions we make.

A Mixture of Fact and Fiction

From its poignant opening—"To begin with, I'm dying"—to Grant's wistful hope that he might be reincarnated as his "real" self, the novel draws the reader into a lively blend of fiction and Civil War history. Ehrlich's sly, raucous humor can be laugh-out-loud funny, but it is always irreverent.

Mary Todd Lincoln, for example, is depicted as a hussy who tries to seduce Grant—probably fiction. "Cump" Sherman, meanwhile, appears as the profane, half-crazed character General Sherman may very well have been. Abraham Lincoln is presented as both an articulate, yarn-spinning rube and the great leader who saved the Union, though Ehrlich places considerably more emphasis on the former.

Grant's Alter Ego

Although the novel runs to roughly 400 pages, the reader is swept briskly through “Hiram” Grant’s remarkable saga. It begins when Hiram exchanges identities with the real Ulysses Grant, who has suffered brain damage in a carriage accident.

From there, the story follows Hiram to West Point, where he meets Sherman and other future military figures, including the eccentric “Stonewall” Jackson and the vain Don Carlos Buell. We accompany him through the Mexican War and, eventually, to his conquest of Robert E. Lee.

Throughout the novel, Hiram repeatedly encounters his amnesiac alter ego. These meetings provide progress reports on the fortunes of both Grants—as well as the narrator’s rueful assessment of how things are turning out, which is usually not very well.

From Failure to Civil War Triumph

Before achieving his extraordinary Civil War successes, Grant endures a seemingly endless succession of failures, compounded by the drinking that helps drive him from the Army. He fails as a farmer and ultimately finds himself working as a clerk in his father’s general store in Illinois.

The Civil War rescues him from obscurity. Grant finds early success at Shiloh, Vicksburg, and in Tennessee. Meanwhile, the “real” Ulysses S. Grant is wounded at Shiloh and nearly dies—until Hiram intervenes to ensure that the man whose identity he stole receives special treatment.

Lee as a “Sissified Mama’s Boy”

As the war progresses, we learn of Grant’s contempt for Robert E. Lee. Grant calls him a “sissified mama’s boy” and blames Lee’s stubbornness and pride for countless battlefield deaths.

Lee famously left West Point without receiving a single conduct demerit. He and Grant first encounter each other during the Mexican War, where Lee delivers an arrogant snub that Grant never forgets. That slight later inspires Grant’s passive-aggressive behavior at Appomattox, where he arrives in a scruffy, mud-stained uniform to accept the impeccably dressed Lee’s surrender.

Grant’s Dismal Presidency

Ehrlich then gives us a wry account of Grant’s failures as a two-term president presiding over one of the most corrupt administrations in American history. Through Grant’s first-person narration, we witness a sadly hilarious, deer-in-the-headlights presidency in which he is plainly out of his depth.

After leaving office, Grant loses everything in an investment scam and begins writing his memoirs to keep his family out of the poorhouse. Along the way, readers should watch for another poignant meeting between President Grant and the displaced Ulysses.

Spoiler Alert: Follow the Money

Near the end of the novel, Grant discovers what he believes to be the deeper reason the Civil War was fought. The revelation comes when he approaches millionaire financier William Vanderbilt, hat in hand, seeking a loan—and learns why so many men had to die.

The motivation for “saving the Union,” Grant discovers, extended far beyond jingoistic slogans and Abraham Lincoln’s flamboyant idealism. The revelation strikes him especially hard, leading to his final encounter with the real Ulysses S. Grant—and to Hiram’s last chance to make sense of it all.

A “Nice Guy” Swept Up by History

Although Ehrlich freely weaves fantasy into the historical record, the novel ultimately contains more truth than fiction. His Grant is the quintessential regular guy: a decent man caught up in history and perpetually unable to earn a good living. Appropriately enough, he names his Missouri farm “Hardscrabble.”

Only the outbreak of war between North and South allows Grant to rise above the institutional mediocrity of his former Army colleagues. He ascends all the way to the presidency, only to become a victim once again—this time of his inability to function in a world of corruption, where his old formulas of command and battlefield strategy no longer serve him.

Grant Speaks is sad, poignant, funny, and thoroughly engaging. You owe it to yourself to read it.

[Buy *Grant Speaks* by Ev Ehrlich on Amazon](#)