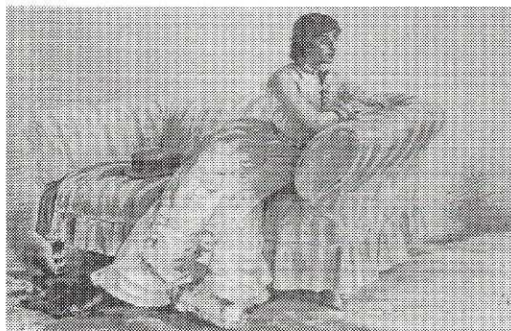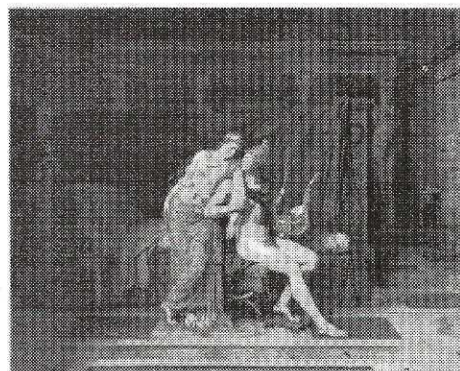# THE HISTORICAL NOVELS

Review

The Good...

The Bad...

...and Helen of Troy

News, Reviews, Interviews

Live Author to begin the interview, who should amble into the room but a Dot Cottonesque cleaning lady armed with a vacuum cleaner whose noise proceeded to drown out our nascent conversation. We struggled on for a minute or two but it became impossible, not so much because of the noise but because neither of us, author or interviewer, could keep our faces straight. Eventually, Mr Saylor's publicist asked the cleaner to stop, which she did with the greatest reluctance accompanied by a look of disgust that I feared would morph into something Jack Aubrey's dyspeptic steward Preserved Killick might have said ("Which I'll be finished when I'm finished", perhaps). Anyway, as an icebreaker, she was a spectacular success, bless her Dot Cotton socks. The rest of the interview passed off very comfortably and though I've been a little nervous at author interviews since, I've never been *that* nervous again. So maybe Our Lady was listening after all – and has a delightful sense of humour.

On that note, I'll hand over to Mary Sharratt. I hope Mary will have as much fun as I've had in doing this job. It would be hard not to!

The Evolution of the Pirate: Romanticism vs. Reality
By Cindy Vallar

The author and friend

Once portrayed as frightening villains, pirates have become daring heroes we yearn to emulate. This transformation from common thieves to roguish heroes began with writers. Early stories, which did not

glamorize sea rovers, depicted gruesome incidents of cruelty. Torture, murder, battles at sea, and marooned marauders fascinated readers. In 1678, a Dutch publisher released a book filled with such descriptions. Written by Alexandre Exquemelin (also known as John Esqueneling), *The Buccaneers of America* was an eyewitness account, the vivid details of which continue to curl the most steadfast toes. A Frenchman by birth, Exquemelin joined the pirates after acquiring some training with a doctor on the Isle of Tortuga in the 1660s. After five years, he quit and returned to Europe.

A General History of the Robbers and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates related the exploits of many well-known pirates. It was published in 1724, not long after the demise and/or capture of Blackbeard, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, and Bartholomew Roberts. Although the identity of its author, Captain Johnson, remains a mystery, this book inspired later stories, such as *Blackbeard the Pirate*. While first released in 1798, this historical novel remained popular into Victorian times.

Credit for starting the romantic myth of piracy rests with George Gordon, Lord Byron, and his poem, *The Corsair*. Conrad, leader of pirates based in the Mediterranean, practiced all the vices of a typical corsair while possessing the traits of noble outlaws akin to Robin Hood. On the first day of publication in 1814, the poem sold 10,000 copies. Over the years it inspired countless operas, paintings, musical scores, and ballets.

When Charles Elms' *The Pirates' Own Book* was released in 1837, it also became a bestseller. The author combined myths with facts drawn from previously published documents to create a "classic of classics" (as Elms himself wrote) about piracy throughout the world from ancient times to the nineteenth century.

Exciting and colorful, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1833) portrayed pirates as fearsome villains to whom one should give a wide berth. The

ruthless Long John Silver and his cohorts forever linked fictional buccaneers with certain images: treasure maps, tropical islands, wooden legs, and parrots. This adventure story also provided future readers and writers with symbols that were in reality myths. Few pirates held their treasure long enough to bury it, preferring instead to spend their ill-gotten gains on drink, women, and games. Nor did they have maps where X marked the spot of their buried treasure. As for forcing captives to walk the plank, the only account of them doing so occurred in 1829.

The release of Rafael Sabatini's *Captain Blood* in 1922 transformed the pirate into a romantic hero. Peter Blood, a physician, ministered to a rebel soldier. Arrested and convicted of treason against the English Crown, Blood was transported to Jamaica where he became the slave of a wealthy plantation owner. After his escape, Blood achieved success as a pirate captain and led his men on daring adventures. The idea of an educated or landed gentleman turned buccaneer through some misfortune became a recurrent theme in literature and drama. In actuality, few English-speaking pirates of the Golden Age of Piracy (1690-1730) matched this description. A notable exception was Stede Bonnet, a gentleman planter who purchased a ship and went on the account in 1717. His life of crime ended the following year when South Carolina officials hanged him.

All these tales were initially written for adults. *Peter and Wendy* (1911), known today as *Peter Pan*, captivated children and introduced them to the world of pirates. As fanciful as this book was, J. M. Barrie gave Captain Hook some of the same traits possessed by one of the most infamous pirates— Blackbeard. One question Barrie left unanswered in his tale, however, was how his villain lost his hand. To explain that, as well as numerous other mysteries about Peter and Neverland, Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson wrote a prequel to the tale entitled *Peter and the Starcatchers* (2004).

As in most historical novels for children and adults published today, these authors portray pirates in a more realistic vein. Black Stache, who becomes Captain Hook, displays a cruelty reminiscent of history's worst pirates, such as Edward Low or L'Ollonais. The authors counter this violence and the misery of life at sea with humor and exaggeration, such as Black Stache's new weapon in his plundering arsenal, a sail shaped like a black brassière, or the totally unappetizing and horrid food served to Peter and his friends.

Playwrights and scriptwriters also added to the romanticism of piracy. The first theatrical production to feature sea rovers was staged in 1612. With the premiere of *The Successful Pirate* in the next century and *The Pirates of Penzance* in 1879, pirates became regular characters in the theater and their bright clean costumes overshadowed the tattered filthy clothes most real pirates wore. Those that surfaced during the Victorian Era continued to be villains, but the melodrama made them not quite believable. Gilbert and Sullivan's pirates entertained rather than frightened.

During the 1950s, pirates were featured in nine movies. Technicolor films loved red and yellow clothes and large ships in flames. *Anne of the Indies* further muddied the waters by pitting Anne Bonny against Blackbeard, who never actually met. These films often portrayed galleons and ships with three masts as the vessels of choice. In reality, novelists came closer to the mark, having their pirates sail sloops and brigs, smaller vessels that were faster than their prey and could navigate shallow waters, where naval vessels hunting pirates could not follow. Hollywood preferred large ships because they were more impressive. The heroic buccaneer had room to fight a duel with the villain, and more actors could fit on the deck during a battle. Climbing aloft on the rigging of a galleon was far more exciting than doing the same on a smaller ship.

If you learned of pirates only from the seventy plus films produced during the 20th century, you have a skewed picture of them. Most of these movies depict pirates who lived during the Golden Age of Piracy. In truth this criminal activity predates the Egyptian pyramids. Heroic buccaneers did not rescue beautiful women from villainous ones. In 1825, Lucretia Parker witnessed the brutal slaying of the ship's crew then was taken prisoner, although she was eventually released. Chinese pirates often held women for ransom. One such incident involved Mei Ying, who fought her captive. In the ensuing struggle, he broke two of her teeth. Rather than submit, she flung them both into the river, where they drowned.

Perhaps the most visually awesome pictures were those that illustrated pirate stories. In the 1920s, one artist rendered the majority of paintings—Howard Pyle. "Marooned," "An Attack on a Galleon," "The Buccaneer was a Picturesque Fellow," and "So the Treasure was Divided" were several of his more famous scenes. His artwork possessed an element of realism that books, films, and plays often lacked. He did not include traditional props found in the majority of pirate stories since the publication of *Treasure Island*. Rather his paintings compelled viewers to consider the true nature of pirates and the harsh life they led.

James L. Nelson, a master storyteller today, attempts to do the same in his historical novels. He casts his pirates in leading roles without turning them into swashbuckling heroes or glamorizing their lives. Oftentimes events propel these characters into going on the account, whether they do so willingly or not. In *Blackbirder* (part two of the Brethren of the Coast trilogy; published 2001), an innocent gesture forces one character to become a pirate, and in making that decision, he knows his friend and employer, a reformed buccaneer, will have no choice but to hunt him.

In *The Only Life That Mattered* (2004), Nelson spins a gritty yarn based on the lives of history's two most famous women pirates, Mary Read and Anne Bonny. These women are three-dimensional characters with strengths, weaknesses, and dreams just like real people, but both know that if caught, they will dance the hempen jig. Even so, they prefer the short and merry life. They epitomize the most admirable of the traits we associate with pirates: freedom, independence, daring. They defy the inequity of society's rules and classification of women as second-class citizens without rights, making them romantic heroines that appeal to women of today who continue the struggle to gain equality in a male-dominated world.

Although no count exists of how many women donned male attire and went on the account, evidence suggests far more became sailors, soldiers, and pirates than originally thought. Rather than relegating female characters to the role of victim or prostitute, historical novelists today have them take center stage as sea-roving protagonists. Some of the best portrayals of these heroines, whom their creators depict with gutsy realism rather than sappy romanticism, include Alan Gold's *The Pirate Queen*, Marsha Canham's *The Iron Rose*, and Celia Rees' *Pirates!*

If real pirates were and continue to be bloodthirsty violent people, why do we romanticize them? Children focus on the image of a buccaneer in search of daring adventure and fantastic riches. They don costumes for Halloween or celebrate their birthdays with pirate-theme parties. They dream of finding a lost treasure and sailing the high seas in wooden ships. Adults dream of those same things, but they also identify with the aura of freedom that sea rovers represented and the lush tropics they inhabited. Criminals by their very nature live outside the law. They neither heed society's rules nor endure the drudgery of commuting to work each day. Pirates were free to do what they wanted and they could savor the warm tropical sun and white sandy beaches instead of sitting in an office from 9 to 5 five days a week. They represent escapism.

Three centuries of enter-tainment—be it found in books, on stage or screen, or at a child's

birthday party — have instilled in us an image that is universally recognized. When we see a man with a wooden leg, wearing a black eye patch, armed with cutlass and pistol, and accompanied by a parrot on his shoulder, we know without hesitation he is a pirate. No matter that he no longer resembles the true marauders of yore. No matter that they had well-deserved reputations for drinking, cursing, and harming innocents. The clean-cut image that captivates us is a far cry from those men. We prefer to root for the downtrodden and wrongfully accused gentleman who became a pirate because of injustice and corruption. He's not to blame for turning to a life of crime; it's our fault.

As is often the case, however, legend and fact merge and the truth becomes muddied. Enjoy the rousing adventure and swash-buckling hero of historical novels. Just remember that such buccaneers may not resemble the infamous pirates of yore or the murderous ones who prey upon ships today.

Cindy Vallar is the editor of Pirates and Privateers, *a monthly column on the history of maritime piracy, which can be found at* www.cindyvallar.com/pirates.html. *She is a HNR reviewer and an associate editor of* Solander.

Being Helen
Val Perry talks to Margaret George about her forthcoming novel, *Helen of Troy*

Margaret George's internationally bestselling novels have spanned 1st century Egypt, Biblical-era Palestine, and 16th century England and Scotland. Why has she now shifted to 1200BCE to tell the story of Helen of Troy? "How else can I find out what it's like to be the most beautiful woman in the world?" she jokes.

Her fifth novel, *Helen of Troy*, is due to hit bookstands in 2006. Though George is known for her portrayals of controversial or ambiguous historical figures such as Henry VIII, Mary Queen of Scots, Cleopatra and Mary Magdalene, Helen may be her most ambitious subject yet. Her protagonists seem to have one thing in common: they are simul-taneously larger-than-life and shrouded in misperceptions and misunderstandings. "[Helen] has been a mystery for over 2,500 years," George explains. "Even Shakespeare didn't know what to make of her.... Marlowe contributed "the face that launched a thousand ships" to our quotations about her, and even Poe wrote a poem 'To Helen.' I wanted to get to know her better. History is coy about her. The best way to approach her was through art."

George's determination to bring Helen to life has led her to university courses on the history of Troy, the annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America, museums around the world, and the site of Troy itself in modern-day Turkey. While film and dramatic depictions of famous historical figures sometimes influence her work (she especially admires Robert Shaw's portrayal of King Henry VIII in *A Man for All Seasons*), George typically prefers a more traditional approach to research. She remains unimpressed with the recent Hollywood film *Troy*, though she notes that it did "give rise to a number of documentaries about Troy that I found helpful, including one in which a new Trojan horse was built and tested to see how many men could fit inside it, how it could be rolled and what its maximum size could be. Conclusion: not very large and not very many men."

It's details such as these that give George's works their characteristic feel. Selecting the right "writing music" for each book also helps to re-create the atmosphere of the time and place. "As usual, Helen was a difficult lady to capture," she says. "I wanted something 'ancient,' but nothing was quite right." So what mood-music finally helped her to conjure the greatest epic of the ancient world? "It's embarrassing to admit this, but the sound tracks from *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *The Time Machine* were quite evocative."

This seeming paradox only reinforces George's conviction that fiction—historical or otherwise—is more about connecting to the reader's emotions than getting the physical details scrupulously exact. "I think historical novels resonate when they tie into common human concerns. We don't read them for facts, really (nonfiction is better for that), but to understand what the facts mean, emotionally, to us. Henry VIII, to me, was a study in what happens to someone who doesn't live up to his gifts. Now that is something that we can all relate to; we don't have to be royalty to understand this dilemma. It's one each of us faces---how do we use what we've been given? Draping it in the form of Henry VIII makes it an 'historical novel,' but really it's a morality tale."

Still, fidelity to time, place and character remain particularly important in the historical genre. George notes the controversy among writers, readers and publishers about whether to use "slangy language in an attempt to make the long-ago seem more accessible....In my opinion it doesn't work. I don't accept Agamemnon saying, "We've gotta have a plan, guys!" or the like. It sounds absurd, and actually has the effect of distancing you from the characters, rather than what the writer intended. Dialogue doesn't have to be purple prose or too formal but it should echo the times, if possible."

George also cautions historical writers against "the slice of life technique"—telling only a relatively small part of a famous person's life. "I know why writers are doing it---we are all under pressure to make things byte-size and have the books smaller---but these are not byte-size people and don't lend themselves to that treatment." Still, she acknowledges that the realities of the marketplace must sometimes intervene: "In spite of myself, I'd have to say if you can make it reasonably short and portable, that would be something to aim for. People travel so much now, they want something