

THE OBSCURE WAR

historical fiction & the War of 1812

Cindy Vallar introduces readers to novels set during this historic period.

One Sunday evening in the seventies, I watched “The Wonderful World of Disney.” In his introduction, Walt Disney talked about a mysterious pirate who helped Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. The pirate was Jean Laffite, and his intriguing story led me to research him. Then I saw Yul Brynner (Laffite) and Charlton Heston (Jackson) in *The Buccaneer*, and read a novel about a woman who, disguised as a man, served aboard an American frigate during the War of 1812. These portrayals germinated a story idea, and I commandeered the family dining room to write a rough draft. After college, I moved to Baltimore, the city where some of the most successful privateers of the war were built and “the rockets’ red glare, the bombs bursting in air” over Fort McHenry inspired Francis Scott Key’s poem that eventually became our national anthem.

Currently, I’m rewriting my story about the pirates who helped defend New Orleans against the British. We are also midway through the war’s bicentennial, so I want to share some historical novels that depict this mostly forgotten Anglo-American war and its enduring legacy.¹ Some characters are real people who witnessed or fought in the conflict. Others are fictional characters who show the complexities, triumphs, and sorrows people experienced in a war with no clear-cut winners.

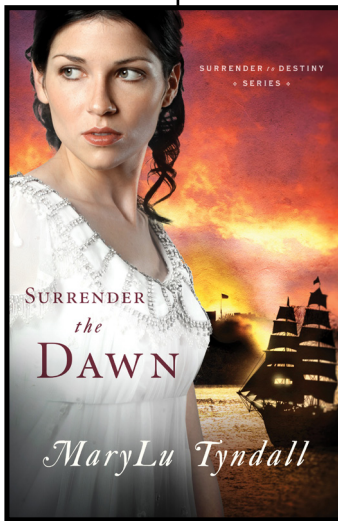
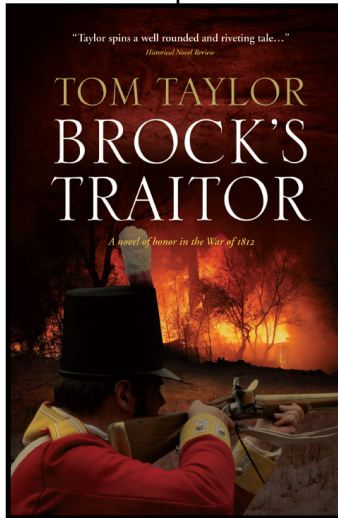
In November 1815 a Boston printer published *The Adventures of Lucy Brewer*, a tale of a prostitute, who dressed as a man and served aboard the United States frigate *Constitution*. In 1976 Berkley published Erika Nau’s historical romance *Angel in the Rigging*. When the novel opens, Lucy Brewer has gained a reputation as the “Princess Pirate.” A young doctor named David Armstrong saves her uncle’s life, and when she later encounters Armstrong

in the early days of the war, she strikes a bargain with him – if he marries her, she will pay to further his medical training in Europe. In order to restore her family’s honor, she needs a new name. Once wed, they will part company and never see each other again. Except they do, and love blossoms. But duty and honor, as well as a jealous rival, intervene and threaten to destroy their love and their lives.

Darlene Marshall’s *Sea Change* (Amber Quill Press, 2011) also involves a cross-dressing heroine, Charlotte “Charley” Alcott. When American privateer David Fletcher kidnaps Charley, he thinks he’s found a British doctor to tend his wounded brother. The more time David and Charley spend together, the more complicated their relationship becomes, especially since he’s oblivious to Charley’s true identity and she refuses to tell him the truth. As love and betrayal unfold, the war between their two countries intervenes with deadly results.

Two other historical romances of the period are Jan Cox Speas’ *My Love, My Enemy* (Sourcebooks Casablanca, 2011) and MaryLu Tyndall’s *Surrender the Dawn* (Barbour, 2011). In Speas’ tale, Page Bradley saves the life of Jocelyn Trevor, a supposed British agent, only to become his prisoner and a pawn in the war. Margaret Barr, in her review of the book, writes: “This fresh edition of the classic romantic historical novel . . . combines the wit and tenderness of Georgette Heyer with the martial detail and atmosphere of Patrick O’Brian, and deserves placement at the pinnacle of its genre.”² The story culminates in the burning of Washington, DC in August 1814. Tyndall’s novel opens earlier that year

in Baltimore. Cassandra Channing wants to purchase shares in a privateering venture, but the only man willing to allow a woman to enter the business world is Luke Heaton, a seafaring scoundrel with a penchant for drinking and gambling. When his inner demons threaten to derail both him and their partnership,



by Cindy Vallar

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stowaway Cassandra ends up endangering Luke, the ship's crew, herself, and her country as the British unleash their invasion of Baltimore and bombardment of Fort McHenry.

While most readers are aware of the historical events just mentioned, I came across several books for younger readers on two important, but lesser-known, episodes in the war. Emily McCully's *The Battle for St. Michaels* (HarperCollins, 2002) is a chapter book about twelve-year-old Caroline Banning and how she helps protect her home when the enemy raids the ship-building town of St. Michaels, Maryland. *Flames in the City* by Candice Ransom (Mirrorstone, 2008) is a time-travel tale about three children (ages five to nine) who help Dolley Madison save Gilbert Stuart's life-size portrait of George Washington in the hours before the British burn the White House. *Sisters of Scituate Light* by Stephen Krensky (Dutton, 2008), *An American Army of Two* by Janet Greeson (Millbrook Press, 1992), and *Abigail's Drum* by John Minahan (Pippin Press, 1995) all tell the story of how the Bates sisters play their fife and drum to fool the British into thinking American troops are coming to rout them from Scituate, Massachusetts. The essence of each story is the same, but the intended audiences differ, as do the authors' interpretations of history.

Adult novels, on the other hand, range in scope from a particular event or year of the war to the entire period from the years leading to the war until peace comes. *1812* by David Nevin (Forge, 2012) is an epic tale of the conflict from the perspectives of several key Americans who participated in the war: Andrew Jackson, Dolley and James Madison, and Winfield Scott. The story encompasses the land battles "from Canada to Washington to New Orleans and in the process brings many of the personalities . . . to life in vivid color."³ Dennis Byrne's *Madness* (Tate Publishing, 2012) also spans the entire war, but is told from the perspective of Irish immigrant Will Quinn, who defends his adopted country even knowing that if he's captured, the British will hang him as a traitor. Aside from the various engagements in which Will participates, *Madness* also shows the politics of war and the struggles within the government to protect our liberty.

Tom Taylor's trilogy focuses on the war between Canada and the United States. His principal protagonist in *Brock's Agent* (Hancock and Dean, 2011), *Brock's Railroad* (2012), and *Brock's Traitor* (August 2013) is Jonathan Westlake, a young Canadian who becomes an agent for Major General Isaac Brock. While Westlake and several other characters provide readers with Canadian perspectives, Taylor enriches his stories by including those of other combatants (American and Native American) and innocent bystanders whose lives are affected by the war. *Brock's Agent* is about redemption and written as if readers experience firsthand the Battle of Tippecanoe through the taking of Fort Detroit. *Brock's Railroad* is about freedom and shows how former American slaves assisted in the fight to protect Canada. It received the Independent Publisher Awards' gold medal in the Military/Wartime Fiction category in 2013. *Brock's Traitor*, a tale of honor, centers around Brock's last assignment to Westlake –

find the traitor within the British army. Taylor's novels adeptly recreate intricate tales that contrast the harsh realities of war with the poignancy of individual experiences and are difficult to forget.⁴

Remember the Raisin by Michael Aye (Bitingduck Press, August 2013) turns on events that occur prior to the opening of the story – the massacre of captured and wounded Americans after their surrender in 1813 and the blundering ineptness that led to William Hull's surrender of Fort Detroit. President Madison sends Jonah Lee north to make certain William Henry Harrison engages the enemy. Aye introduces readers to the Kaintucks, frontier fighters who gained a reputation as expert marksmen, and takes readers to Oliver Hazard Perry's naval battle for control of Lake Erie and Henry Procter's stand at the Battle of the Thames where Tecumseh, the Shawnee war chief who united the tribes to fight with the British, dies. This novel is the first in a new series by Aye, who is better known for his Fighting Anthonys naval series.⁵

In Patrick O'Brian's *The Fortune of War* (Norton, 1979) Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin become prisoners of war in Boston. Jack provides a British perspective of the deadly naval duel between HMS *Shannon* and the USS *Chesapeake* while Maturin tries to elude French agents who want to kill him. *The Far Side of the World* (HarperCollins, 1984) continues Aubrey's exploits, this time in his attempt to intercept the USS *Norfolk*, which is attacking British whalers in the South Seas.

Hopefully, these titles will whet your interest in this important, but obscure, war until I return with part two of novels set during the War of 1812, which will appear on the HNS website. If you would like to recommend a book for inclusion in that article, please contact me at cindy@cindyvallar.com. ❀

Notes:

1. For readers who would like an overview of the war from the British, Canadian, American, and Native American perspectives, visit the PBS website for *The War of 1812* documentary: <http://www.pbs.org/wned/war-of-1812/essays/>.
2. Barr's review appeared in the May 2011 issue of *Historical Novels Review* (HNR) and can be read online at <http://historicalnovelsociety.org/reviews/my-love-my-enemy/>.
3. This quote is taken from Barry Webb's review, which appeared in the May 2012 issue of HNR and can be read online at <http://historicalnovelsociety.org/reviews/1812/>.
4. I've reviewed all three novels for HNR. *Brock's Agent* appeared in the November 2011 issue (online at <http://historicalnovelsociety.org/reviews/brocks-agent/>) and *Brock's Railroad* was reviewed in May 2013 (online at <http://historicalnovelsociety.org/reviews/brocks-railroad/>). A special thanks to Tom for the galley of *Brock's Traitor*, the review of which appears on p. 37 of this issue.
5. I would also like to thank Michael Aye for sending me the galley of his novel.



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