

THE RED PENCIL

Cindy Vallar analyzes the work behind published manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Joan Druett's *Dearest Enemy*.

Revising a story that's already written is challenging. Over the past few years, I've been reworking a tale I wrote in college, back when I knew little about writing or editing. It's not unusual for an author to regain the rights to her work and then make revisions. Although my story has yet to be published, Joan Druett's *Promise of Gold* was first published in 1990 as a single volume that "was really the adventures of the brig." Soon after I returned home from last year's HNS Conference in Florida, she asked me to review her new trilogy, *Promise of Gold*. She had decided to expand the one book into three because each "has a different tone – the alpaca hunt is a riotous comedy, the gold rush has a much darker theme, and the third story is more conventional, being a resolution of the mystery and the romance. So dividing it up seemed logical."

Judas Island, the first book, focuses on "the hunt for the alpacas, with the back story of the developing relationship of Jake and Harriet, and her gradually evolving history, ending in the arrival at California." Jake Dexter is captain of the *Gosling*, a ship once owned by an eccentric privateer, while Harriet Gray, his unwanted passenger, is a famous actress. If the reader only wants to read this book, Joan feels he or she will "feel quite satisfied, as his or her imagination provided the ending, with Jake and Harriet in a happy lover-mistress relationship."

The second book, *Calafia's Kingdom*, takes place in California in 1848, after James Marshall discovers gold at Sutter's Mill. Readers meet Frank Sefton, Harriet's husband, whose polish and charm conceal his ruthless nature. Although he abandoned Harriet soon after their wedding in New Zealand, now he insinuates himself into her new life and incarcerates her in a mansion where her only companion is a Chinese servant named Ah Wong. *Dearest Enemy* concludes the trilogy, and encompasses Harriet's desire to open a theatre in Sacramento

with the help of Jake, his crew, and her brother, Royal, who's also an actor. To Jake it's a preposterous idea, but neither he nor Harriet ever dreams how life-threatening the venture will be.

Finding a scene from the original book to compare with a scene in the trilogy proved problematic because only a few pages of the former still exist. Joan selected a fragment that depicts Harriet walking with Royal and one of the crew from the *Gosling* "along the riverside path to the brig, which is moored in Sacramento. Her brother makes her finally face how she truly feels about Jake."

Then, one morning, Royal was there as well as Davy to escort her to the brig, and when they walked out on to the path and Harriet looked across tent city to the Embarcadero, the brig had her sails out, the canvas all loose on the masts.

Panic gripped her; she couldn't think, she couldn't move, she couldn't breathe. Then she cried, "No – oh no!" and began to run. Davy grunted with fright, and Royal's hand lunged out and stopped her.

She was weeping wildly; she barely saw his face. Then he shook her, not at all gently and shouted, "Harriet, what's wrong, for God's sake?"

"The brig. She's . . . she's . . ."

Royal peered at her. Her eyes cleared enough to see him hunch his shoulders so that he peered into her face from her level. Then he said with eloquent disgust, "Oh, for God's sake, Hat, 'tis only the canvas out drying."

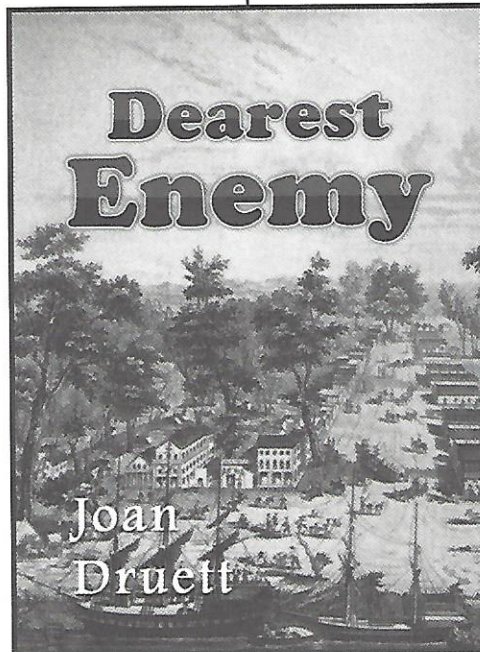
"Drying? What . . . ?" Then she realized what a fool she'd made of herself. She knew that canvas had to be hung out every now and then, or else like household linen it went moldy, of course she knew that. She straightened her shoulders, gathered the shreds of her dignity about her and said haughtily, "I'm sorry."

Royal said brusquely, "When will you stop this performance, Hat? You're sending the man to the end of his tether."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Yes, you do. He loves you, Hat, he loves you."

Something jerked inside her. She pressed her lips together and said curtly, "I don't inspire that emotion in men, Royal."



“What utter poppycock! Just because Sefton treated you so shabbily . . .”

The problem with this version is that Harriet isn't the one finally comprehending that she loves Jake or that “she had, in fact, never fallen out of love with him,” in spite of an earlier scene where he drives a seemingly insurmountable wedge into their relationship. When Joan reworked this revelation, which appears in *Dearest Enemy*, Harriet arrives on the brig without the histrionics, and Jake asks her about Ah Wong.

“Tell me about Ah Wong.”

“Ah Wong?” Again, tears stung her eyes. Every day, she watched for him, but had never glimpsed him again.

She took a deep, shaky breath, and said, “He was my servant, but he was also my friend. My only friend. Such a small, harmless man, and so frightened. His ambitions were innocent enough, just to learn good English, and . . . and I often wondered what kind of person he had been in his homeland, because he was so well educated. Perhaps he was a teacher, certainly a scholar. He liked to hear me recite, so he translated ancient Chinese poetry for me.”

And then, before she knew she was going to do it, she was quoting softly, with more tears in her eyes –

*Yellow clouds beside the walls; crows
roosting in the sky.*

*Flying back, they caw, caw, calling in the
vines.*

*In the loom she weaves brocade, the
Feather River girl,*

*Made of emerald yarn like mist, the
window hides her words.*

*She stops the shuttle, sorrowful, and
thinks of the distant man.*

*She stays alone in the lonely room, her
tears just like the rain.*

“Poetry like that,” she finished lamely. She wondered why she had chosen that poem, and wished that she hadn't.

When she looked at Jake, he looked startled. Then his eyebrows came down and he said, “Was Sefton the distant man in the poem?”

“My God, no! How can you think that?”

Why is this version better? In the original, “Harriet's reaction is over the top and . . . she is a stereotype, without character.” The

rewrite, however, “is grittier, not so over the top, and yet more raw. Not only has Harriet betrayed herself by quoting the poem, but she has come to her own realization” that she loves Jake. “[S] he is a real person, with deep feelings, and a past.”

Anyone who reads this trilogy, or any of Joan's other novels, soon discovers she creates memorable characters. How does she do this? “By giving them comprehensible motives. . . . [It] makes them real men and women with personal triumphs and tragedies, real people who do their best to overcome the problems that are thrown at them by the story.”

As any writer will tell you, characters don't just miraculously appear. Something stirs an idea and as the story evolves, so do the characters. “Harriet was originally based on the real Mrs. Ray, of the Theatre Royal, New Zealand, famous for hailing the hero as ‘me ‘ope, me only ‘ope.’ As Harriet turned into a heroine (developing a strong character all by herself, often despite me), the guise of Mrs. Ray didn't suit her any more. . . . Jake developed as a foil for the rapidly developing Harriet, gaining the necessary robust sense of humor along the way. And then there is Ah Wong. We were spending many weeks in mainland China at the time, and I was fascinated with ancient Chinese poetry Ah Wong is the servant who sacrificed himself for the heroine – the girl who became Columbine in *commedia dell'arte*, who is, of course, Harriet. Royal is Harlequin, and don't tell Jake, because he would either be offended or find it very funny, but he is Pierrot. And Sefton, of course, is the villain. His scam, aided by Don Roberto and the Murietas, was a real crime – but in the Yukon gold rush, not the Californian one.”

Joan did a lot of research for these books, which is evident to anyone who reads her stories. “I had to find a plausible pirate treasure for Judas Island – a real one . . . though the real island is Cocos. The alpaca hunt is based on the real story of Charles Ledger.¹ The adventures of the brig on the Sacramento River are based on the journal kept by William Bradley on the *Oscar* of Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, which is held at the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society. Just as in the novel, the ship was owned by a company, and the vessel was moored to the riverbank and turned into a boardinghouse. I didn't want to turn the brig into a whaling vessel, so the *Gosling* has a different fate. Many of the details of the ‘diggings’ come from the *Oscar* journal, as well as the books I read.”

When Joan first thought of writing the original story, she wanted to write about pirates. She just couldn't think of an admirable hero, so she decided a pirate ship would take center stage. “Accordingly, the *Gosling* – the baby Golden Goose – came into being. My idea was that it was previously owned by a privateer . . . who collected anything to do with buried gold, and

that the next captain would find his journals and scrapbooks in a secret panel in the wainscoting of the great cabin, and become entranced with the idea of finding pirate gold.”

What of the history behind *Dearest Enemy*? It’s based on the real story of the first theater on the Sacramento – not just its construction, but also the staging of the first play. The reporter, “Mr. Giles and his newspaper are equally authentic.” Joan then takes this historical information and seamlessly weaves it into “an exhilarating voyage not soon to be forgotten.”²

Since Old Salt Press published the Promise of Gold trilogy as e-books, all three titles were released fairly close together. Why e-books rather than print? “Once I had decided that it was logical to turn it into three books, digital publishing seemed the logical way to go. Also, I am a great admirer of Shayne Parkinson, who has developed digital serial publishing into a fine art.” For me, being able to read what happens from the moment Jake and Harriet meet until the mysteries that entwine their lives are solved was a true joy. As I wrote in my review: “Complete with humor, romance, tragedy, and fantastical exploits, Joan Druett expertly recreates the dizzying days of the California gold rush, where fortunes could be made and lost in the span of a day. Her characters come from all walks of life and are so vividly portrayed that they walk off the pages into your room.”

The cover art for *Dearest Enemy* also caught my attention because it differed from the artwork used for the first two books. Her husband, Ron Druett, created those two paintings for her. The third cover came from a lithograph of Sacramento, which she discovered on Wikicommons. “It was perfect, as not only does it have the theater in the row of buildings, but there is a brig just across the Embarcadero, as I describe the *Gosling* in the novel. I had to hunt for its original use to give a decent sourcing in the book, and also make absolutely certain it is in the public domain.”

I always ask the novelists who graciously agree to spotlight their writing in “The Red Pencil” what else they’d like to share with readers and writers of historical fiction. Joan writes:

Watch your dialogue like a hawk. Obviously, modern words and phrases must be avoided, but over-use of ancient dialogue makes your characters quaint instead of convincing. A word like “comely” might have been commonly used in the period, but unless it is used judiciously, modern readers are more likely to be alienated than impressed. And personally, I also avoid dialect, as it jars on the eye.

But never forget, despite the pitfalls, that writing historical fiction is terrific fun. There’s a double

advantage – not only does the author have the joy of creating characters and putting them in a rich setting, but she or he has the fun of research, which is the closest most writers get to hunting for buried treasure.³ ❀

Notes:

1. To learn more about this Australian adventurer, Joan recommends this website:
<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ledger-charles-4004>.
2. Taken from my review of *Judas Island*, which can be read in its entirety at <http://www.cindyvallar.com/Druett.html>
3. If you’d like to learn more about Joan and her writing, visit her website at <http://www.joan.druett.gen.nz/>



CINDY VALLAR is a columnist, freelance editor, historical novelist, and workshop presenter. Dark Oak Press recently released her historical fantasy, “Rumble the Dragon,” in their short story anthology, *A Tall Ship, A Star, and Plunder*. You can visit her at www.cindyvallar.com.