

Red Pencil

CINDY VALLAR *analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles James L. Nelson.*

A common fallacy throughout history was that women couldn't do what men did. Time and time again, however, women stepped forward to prove otherwise.¹ While Joan of Arc wore men's clothing, she did not disguise her sex, but others did, including Mary Read.

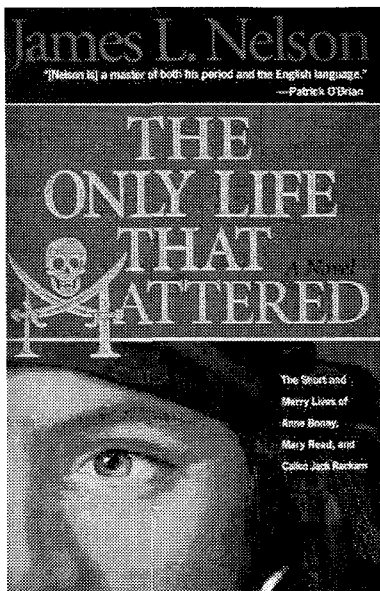
Flanders. The summer campaigning season of the Grand Alliance. A full nine years before Mary Read would stand at the bar in St. Jago de la Vega in Jamaica and half a world away. The year, 1711. Mary's eighteenth.

She rode through the pre-dawn black, the horse and saddle between her legs as easy a fit as a well-worn hat. The smell of the horses, the cumulative sound of a hundred or more riders moving together, was all so familiar now that they did not intrude at all on her thoughts.

She reached down and adjusted her saber where it was chaffing on her thigh, cleared her throat, and spit on the dirt road below her.

She was a horse trooper, a corporal in a light cavalry unit. She was not Mary Read, of course. Mary Read was someone locked away deep in her memories, a fragile doll to be pulled out and examined once in a while, a thing for her to marvel at, and then put away, unseen.

Rather, she was Michael Read, Corporal Michael Read, of the second platoon of E Company of Walpole's Regiment of Light Cavalry. A young man making a military career, fighting for his country, and no one knew or suspected anything different.



Walpole's was one of those elite squads formed in England by some well-heeled gentleman with a thought toward soldiering and money enough for a commission and for equipping his recruits. Once formed, the regiment of light horse had been sent to the killing fields of Flanders to do battle with the French and stop the alliance of the Bourbon household in Spain.

Mary, in point of fact, didn't care a pile of dung who sat on the throne of Spain. But she was a cavalry soldier, had

been a foot soldier before that and a sailor aboard a man-of-war before that. She had spent most of her life masquerading as a boy and man, serving the King of England under arms. She went where she was told to go, and killed whomever she was told to kill.

Thus begins *The Only Life That Mattered*, James (Jim) L. Nelson's tale about Mary Read, Anne Bonny, and Calico Jack Rackham, three 18th-century pirates. While a crewmember aboard the *Golden Hinde*, a

replica of Sir Francis Drake's 1577 ship, Jim met a fellow sailor, now his wife, who introduced him to this trio of pirates. "Since then, it was always in the back of my mind that it would make a terrific book. When the opportunity came to write it, I looked at the primary source material . . . and the secondary material . . . From those sources I imagined what kinds of people these must have been, to lead them to the places where they ended up."²

Characters are essential to a story. Without them, the writer has merely a framework of events without anyone to move the events to fruition. Yet, readers want and expect more than just stick figures to populate the story. Characters, like people, must be three-dimensional beings with strengths and weaknesses, dreams and regrets, a past and a future. This is no less required of historical novelists, but their characters must also interact and think according to the social norms of their time period. An equal challenge for the author to pull off successfully comes when a character poses as a member of the opposite sex. While women wear men's attire today, it was not the norm in the past, yet some successfully masqueraded as men. Doing so, though, required far more of a woman than just donning a disguise. She had to adopt the mannerisms common to men, such as Mary did when she spit on the road. Mary Read accomplished this feat not once, but throughout most of her life. She learned to fight, carouse, swear, and walk as men did.

While the facts about her early life are scarce, what we know of it first appeared in 1724 within the pages of *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates* by Captain Charles Johnson.³ "[T]he odd Incidents of their rambling Lives are such, that some may be tempted to think the whole Story no better than a Novel or Romance; but since it is supported by many thousand Witnesses . . . who were present at their Tryals and heard the Story of their lives . . . the Truth of it can be no more contested, than that there are such . . . Pyrates."⁴ The passage above from Jim's novel elaborates on the tale Johnson wrote, but does so in a way that makes Mary a remarkable, but believable, character who achieved success in a man's world.

The Only Life That Mattered is a reprint of *The Sweet Trade*, which was published under the pen name Elizabeth Garrett. "There were a number of reasons why the book could not come out under my name, and my agent and I thought it might have more appeal to a female readership if it was ostensibly written by a female author."⁵ When the book initially came out, it didn't sell well. "I think most editors who read it were looking for a romance, but it is not that at all . . . Once they read it, most editors did not know what to do with it, and so turned it down."⁶ Few authors get the chance to have their work published once let alone twice, but Jim did not want this to be the end of the tale, for "[t]he story of Calico Jack, Anne, and Mary is an incredible one, and it holds a special place in my heart. The reality of pirate life was not romantic, and neither is the story of these three people. It is a gritty, often ugly story and a part of the real history of piracy in the Caribbean."⁷ Once the original book went out of print and Jim regained the rights to it, his agent submitted the manuscript to a new publisher. "The people at McBooks Press, with their history of producing some of the best maritime fiction currently being published, have understood better than any other publisher could where this book fits."⁸

Jim's new editor felt the original version dragged a bit and that Mary's tentmate, Frederick Heesch, was too much of a wimp. Although Mary is a nurturer, the editor believed she would not fall



for a guy if he was “too much of a putz.” Compare how the reader first meets Heesch. In *Sweet Trade*, Frederick sits before a fire in their tent, cleaning his boots. So intent is he on the task that he fails to hear Mary enter.

“Just like home, Frederick,” she said.

He looked up, smiled, his teeth white, his face, his lovely face, pleased and disingenuous. Boyish. His hair was a thick, dark mop, most of it contained by a black ribbon, tied back in a long queue. “Ah, Michael, there you are. I did not bear you approach.”

“A good thing I was not coming to cut your throat.”

“Now who would wish such a thing?”

“Who, indeed?”

Who indeed? No one. No one save the enemy would wish to hurt Frederick. Frederick Heesch was as kind and unassuming a young man as one might hope to find anywhere, a great anomaly in the rude world of the army.

He was Flemish. Like so many of his countrymen, he chose to fight with the English army, which promised more action than the forces of his native land. His heart and spirit were set on warfare, and he was eager for combat. But he was a thoughtful person, good-natured, with a ready wit. Mary did not think he possessed the soul of a warrior.

His fellow soldiers liked him, after the fashion of a silly younger brother. Mary Read loved him, deeply, profoundly.

While it's never said in the book, one has to wonder why Frederick gives so much attention to boot polishing when it's pouring rain outside and the campground is a quagmire of mud. As the scene unfolds, Mary points out that he isn't taking proper care of his mount, for Frederick's mount has a welt from a chaffing saddle. He admits to her that, “I would be lost without you.” In *The Only Life That Mattered*, however, we meet Frederick with his platoon searching for the enemy.

Frederick Heesch, her tent-mate, rode just a little ahead of her and to the right. Mary gave her horse a nudge with her heels, brought herself up alongside Frederick. She wanted to hear his voice.

“Frederick,” she said, soft, so the sergeant would not hear her over the sound of the horses' hooves, “have you got a plug?”

Frederick looked over at her and shook his head, his expression a mix of surprise and bewilderment. He dug in the pocket of his regimental coat, pulled out a twisted hunk of tobacco, handed it over to Mary. She tore off a piece with her teeth and handed it back.

“What in hell are you doing here?” Frederick asked in the same hushed tone. Frederick's platoon, but not Mary's, had been ordered for the morning's fight. Any sensible person in Mary's position would still be safe abed.

Mary shrugged. “Came to this God-forsaken country to kill Frenchmen. Hate to miss the chance.”

Frederick smiled at her, that wonderful smile of his. “Not so God-forsaken, you fucking English roast-beef.”

Frederick Heesch was Flemish. Like so many of his countrymen he chose to fight with the English army, which promised more action than the forces of his native land. His heart and spirit were set on warfare, and he was eager for combat. But he was a thoughtful person, good-natured, with a ready wit. Mary did not think he possessed the soul of a warrior.

His fellow soldiers liked him as a good and decent comrade in arms. Mary Read loved him, deeply, profoundly. She would not let him ride into battle alone, without her to watch his back. That was why she was there.

The trooper riding ahead and to their left swivelled around, frowned when he saw Mary. “Read? What are you doing on this raid? I swear to God, I think you and Heesch are bugging each other.”

“Are you jealous, Adams? 'Cause I'm happy to do you too, if you wish,” Frederick offered.

Mary blew Adams a kiss. “Reckon the Frenchies will bugger all of us good before Heesch can.”

Mary allowed her horse to fall back and she rode with the others near the back of the regiment, far from Frederick. There would be opportunity later to get close to him, but for now she was better off keeping her distance, lending some credence to her claim that she was there for the fighting alone.

While this passage provides some physical description about Frederick, it is far less than in the original work. Instead, Jim chooses to reveal the character through action, much like a motion picture does. As Renni Browne writes in *Self-editing for Fiction Writers*¹⁰, “It's often a good idea to include . . . a few specific details that capture the look of the character . . . But when it comes to your characters' personalities, it's much more effective to have these emerge from character action, reaction, and dialogue than from description.” This passage also shows Frederick in a better light, making him appear less of a wimp.

The other aspect that improves the scene is that the soldiers are portrayed in a realistic fashion, and Mary fits right in. No one knows she's a woman, and this scene reveals that she has mastered the habits of men, such as chewing tobacco, and that she exchanges crude conversation with them as if she's done it all her life. Their conversation may jar the reader, but it portrays an element of realism that readers associate with soldiers and sailors.

One other passage provides a glimpse into Mary's character.

This would not be a grand fight, a history-making battle. It would not be a Donauwörth or a Blenheim or a Ramillies. The real fighting had moved south,

into France and Spain, and only vestiges of the armies were now left in Flanders, to snipe at one another and stage small-scale battles and raids on one another's foraging parties.

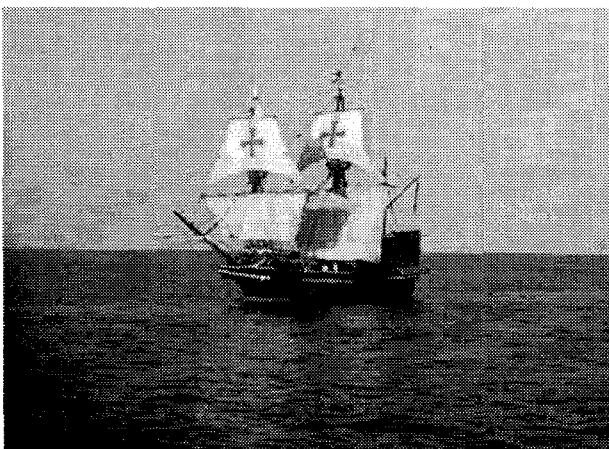
But that did not matter to Corporal Read. She had seen enough of real warfare to know that it was not somehow more glorious to die in the midst of an epoch-making fight. She knew death in all its guises, knew the twisted, broken bodies, the dull eyes staring toward heaven, the flies swarming around gaping wounds, knew it was just as horrid in a foraging raid as it was in a battle between the great armies of nations. It was not for her, and she would see it would not happen to Frederick. She could not allow so perfect a man to end up a mangled and bloody corpse.

Here Jim provides the reader with a window into Mary's motivation for staying in the army. It also hints at Mary's pragmatism. She doesn't fight for glory, but to protect the man she loves. It is a theme that recurs throughout her life, for later in her life, she duels with a pirate to protect someone less skilled in the art of warfare.

In my reviews of Jim's books, I've called him a master storyteller, which stems in part from his knowledge of and experience aboard wooden sailing ships. His interest in ships and the sea began in his childhood, during which time he read and reread C. S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower novels and built model ships. After high school graduation, he hitchhiked and motorcycled around the United States before attending college. He spent two years working in the television industry, but realized he "could not stand a) the television industry, b) Los Angeles and c) being ashore,"¹¹ so he signed aboard the *Golden Hinde*. He also served on the brig *Lady Washington* and spent two years as Able Bodied Seaman and Third Mate aboard the HMS *Rose*, a replica of a British frigate from the American Revolution. In 1996 Pocket Books published his first novel, *By Force of Arms*. His novel of the Civil War navy, *Glory in the Name*, won the 2004 American Library Association's William Y. Boyd Award for Excellence in Military Fiction. He lives with his wife Lisa, daughter Betsy, and sons Nate and Jack in Maine. Jim is a full-time novelist, and sometime pirate named Black Jim Spudcake, who educates children on the true history of pirates.

Notes

1. Vallar, Cindy. "Women and the Jolly Roger," *Pirates and Privateers*, March 2004. [<http://www.cindyvallar.com/womenpirates.html>]
2. From the author's website, <http://www.jamesnelson.com/The%20Only%20Life.htm> (accessed 3 August 2005).
3. Some critics believe this was a pen name and that Daniel Defoe actually wrote the book. Whether the authors are one and the same may never be proven, but it is a main source about 18th-century piracy even though the accounts mix fact with fiction, and sufficient evidence exists to corroborate its authenticity.



4. Defoe, Daniel. *A General History of the Pyrates*. Edited by Manuel Schonhorn. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1999, (page 153).
5. See note #2.
6. Ibid.
7. Nelson, James L. *The Only Life That Mattered*. Ithaca, New York: McBooks Press, 2004. (Author's Note)
8. Ibid.
9. Correspondence with author.
10. Brown, Renni, and Dave King. *Self-editing for Fiction Writers*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. (page 16).
11. See footnote #2.

Cindy Vallar is a freelance editor, an associate editor for Solander, and the Editor of *Pirates and Privateers* (www.cindyvallar.com/pirates.html). A retired librarian, she also writes historical novels, teaches workshops, and reviews books.

Kate Allan Asks ...What is Historical Fiction?

KATE ALLAN on Jean Plaidy and whether historical fiction is understood.

The line between fact and fiction within historical fiction can be very thin indeed. Historical fiction can be based on stories of real people, for example Jean Plaidy's *Queens of England* series of novels. Real people, but their stories told with the artistic license that describing a work as fiction allows. More about Jean Plaidy later.

I'd like to ask what readers of historical fiction think historical fiction really is. Is the word "fiction" even properly understood? My co-written historical novel *The Lady Solider* by Jennifer Lindsay came out earlier this year. A lot of its inspiration came from fact, and this is something which many members of the public I've spoken to while out and about doing events seem to have trouble understanding. Am I not explaining things properly? Or is there something more to it?

I'm standing, dressed in period costume, on the edge of an old walled garden in Basingstoke, Hampshire, England, which had been visited by Jane Austen herself and now hosts an annual Jane Austen fair. I'm talking to people about my books after having done a reading from *The Lady Soldier*.

"Do you read historical fiction?" I asked a woman.

"Fiction? Eh, I thought it was a real story. Isn't it real?"

"Well, no, it's made up."

"Oh!" She shakes her head. "I like biographies. Not fantasy stuff."

"It is based on some fact. The true stories of women who really did serve as soldiers in historic times. We researched their experiences and with these . . ."

But I've lost the argument. The woman simply shakes her head more vigorously and starts to move away. "No, I like stories based on real history, you know."