

The Brief History of a Historical Novel

Thomas Jefferson was an enigma to everyone he met. A century and a half after his death, one writer strives to understand, if not the man himself, then at least the world as it knew him.

BY MAX BYRD

LET ME BEGIN WITH A CONFESSION.

For many years, as I liked to tell my friends, I led a life of crime, though part-time only. By day, I taught 18th-century English literature at the University of California, Davis. By night, I wrote somewhat lurid paperback detective novels for Bantam Books. I did my scholarly research in my office or the quiet stacks of the library. The research for my detective novels I carried out in low bars and off-duty cop haunts in the mean streets of the San Francisco Tenderloin. Once I even enrolled in a special course in the California Highway Patrol Bomb Squad School.

But one morning in 1988 my publisher at Bantam, a man named Steve Rubin, whom I had never actually met, called me. After a few minutes of cheerful small talk, he cleared his throat and said rather ominously that he didn't much like detective novels, even mine. That produced a long, painful

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Portrait of Thomas Jefferson (1975), by Jamie Wyeth

silence at my end of the line, as I waited to hear the whistle of the ax falling. Instead, Steve went on to say that, since I was a specialist in the 18th century, he wanted me to give up crime and try my hand at a historical novel set in that period. Specifically, he wanted me to write a novel about Thomas Jefferson.

The dumbest idea I had ever heard, I told him. In my opinion, Jefferson was a character completely unsuited for fiction. He was not a dramatic man of action, but a man of the pen and the book—his life had been crowded with incident and accomplishment, but there was no obvious *pattern* to it, such as a novelist seeks. (I mentioned, by contrast, Lincoln, the subject of innumerable novels, who was a kind of American Hamlet—witty, melancholy, framed forever against the titanic backdrop of the Civil War,

asked why I had chosen those years. Because, I said, that was when Jefferson served as the American minister to France, and my research would have to be done in Paris. This time, the long, painful silence was at his end.

There are essentially two kinds of historical novels. One you might call simply a “costume drama”—the kind of story with swords and muskets and powdered wigs, but no real pretense to telling the reader anything significant, or even true, about authentic historical figures or events. The best examples of this kind of historical novel are those by the great Rafael Sabatini, author of such stirring adventure yarns as *Scaramouche* (1921) and—my nomination for

one of the two or three best titles in fiction—*Captain Blood* (1922). A more recent and far more elegant example is Patrick O’Brian’s series of seafaring novels set during the Napoleonic Wars, astonishing in their realistic detail but centered on two

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entirely fictional heroes, Captain Jack Aubrey and ship’s surgeon Stephen Maturin.) Jefferson had lived a long, untheatrical life, seemingly little tormented by inner conflicts, and died in bed at the age of 83. Moreover, he was famously enigmatic. Almost everyone who had ever known him used the same words to describe him: elusive, reserved, aloof. (The word that turned up most often to characterize him, as I later learned, was “feline.”)

But Steve kept telephoning, and eventually, after another detective novel or two, I came around. I told him I would write a novel about Thomas Jefferson on two conditions: that he would cover the costs of my research, and that he would allow me to focus on Jefferson’s life in the years from 1784 to 1789. Yes, yes, he said, somewhat impatiently, of course he would pay my research expenses. He imagined (I know because he has since told me so) that these would be chiefly some books, some photocopying, perhaps a short trip to Monticello. Then, as an afterthought, he

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Alas, I had agreed to write, not a new version of *Captain Blood*, but the other kind of historical novel: a sober, factually accurate story about an actual historical figure. Steve Rubin had set out few guidelines, but he made it clear that, because the general outlines of Jefferson’s life and character are so familiar and established, it would be imprudent to take many liberties. Whatever I wrote would have to be, in a very strict sense, faithful to the facts.

This raised a fundamental question. I knew Sabatini, I knew Alexander Dumas, I knew *Treasure Island*—but what, in fact, *is* a serious historical novel? In a literal sense, what does it look like? Trained as an academic, I naturally decided to seek out the authorities and establish a working definition.

There is surprisingly little scholarship concerned with historical fiction, but all colleagues and bibliographies agreed that the place for me to start was a



Jefferson's Francophilia encompassed more than wine. The Hôtel de Salm, above, was going up in Paris during the years when he sat in the Tuileries gardens across the Seine. Upon his return to Virginia, he redesigned Monticello midway through its construction to include its distinctive white dome.

book called *The Historical Novel* (1962) by the Marxist critic Georg Lukács. This turned out to be a thick, impenetrable work of literary theory, propounding the idea that historical fiction began with Sir Walter Scott and, at its best, always concerns the conflict between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. As a theory of class consciousness, I suppose it was impressive. As a guide to a practicing novelist . . . well, here is a sentence from the preface: "No serious Marxist genre theory is possible unless an attempt is made to apply the theory of reflection of materialistic dialectics to the problem of the differentiations of genres." I put down Lukács, reminding myself that Dr. Johnson had called theory "speculation by those unversed in practice."

I turned, then, to the one authority who, for a writer, comes before any other. Telling serious, dramatic stories about great historical events, about vanished ways of life and departed heroes, is a literary exercise at least as old as Homer. Indeed, as I sat in Paris with my suitcase full of books about Jefferson open before me,

I realized that there were three basic principles I could take from the ancient poet and apply, almost as rules, to my modern historical novel.

First, no matter how much an author concentrates on the foreground of character and action (the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles in the *Iliad*, for example), a serious vision of the past requires a larger thematic background, which we might call the "history of the tribe" (in Homer, why Troy would fall; in Virgil, how Rome began). In the historical novels I knew, this was plain. Kenneth Roberts's wonderful novel *Arundel* (1933) focuses on a single long march and battle in 1775, but opens a window on the whole American Revolution. William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), though about one dramatic episode in 1831, seems to set in motion the coming Civil War.

Second, serious historical fiction rarely chronicles a life or story from beginning to end, as an academic historian might. It likes to choose instead one or two

crucial moments and begin in medias res. Long as it is, the *Iliad* covers only the climactic last year of the Trojan War, just as Gore Vidal's splendid novel *Lincoln* (1984) deals not with the president's life from cradle to grave, but with his four heroic years in office.

And third, the scale of a serious historical novel is generally wide and crowded, not narrow and focused like that of a detective story. It ranges from the top of Mount Olympus to the gloomy, dismal gates of the Underworld, and its cast of characters is similarly large and varied, from Zeus the Thunderer down to the wretched, beggarly Thersites. The form, like the effect, is epic.

I saw at once the difficulty I would have in devising a clear plot in such a sprawling literary form. Jefferson



Jefferson called William Short, his secretary in France, "my adoptive son," but they disagreed about slavery and the French Revolution. Jefferson, Short wrote, had "too favorable an opinion of the animal called Man."

arrived in Paris in August 1784, as John Adams and Benjamin Franklin were preparing to leave. (Famously, Jefferson declared that he had come to succeed Franklin, since no one could possibly replace him.) For the next five years, as American minister plenipotentiary, he would be concerned with everything from

promoting the sale of American tobacco in France, to squelching the Barbary pirates in North Africa, to advising Lafayette on the incipient French Revolution. Amid the complex and unending political episodes that dominated his public life, Jefferson also found time for a romantic interlude with young Maria Cosway, the wife of the fashionable and repellent English portrait artist Richard Cosway (whose sideline, I was fascinated to learn, was making pornographic snuffbox lids for the nobility). And in 1787, 14-year-old Sally Hemings arrived in Paris as the slave companion to Jefferson's daughter Polly.

As I crawled through volume after volume of Jefferson's letters and the huge biography by Dumas Malone, one question was with me constantly: How was I to find a *shape* for such an overwhelming abundance of material?

For some years, I've been convinced that the late novelist John Gardner was right when he said that there are only two basic plots in fiction: someone goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. In fact, that's only one plot, seen from two different points of view. Gradually, I came to recognize that my plot was really the story of Jefferson's journey from the forests and villages of America to the world city of Paris, with all the sophistication and glamour that magic name evokes. Jefferson, after all, had grown up on the virtual edge of the Virginia wilderness, outside the little settlement of Charlottesville, among Indians and grizzled old sulfur-mouthed trappers and mountain guides. His father had been a frontier surveyor and planter. Before Paris, the largest city he had ever seen was Philadelphia, which, with about 18,000 inhabitants, was really only a small town. Suddenly, at the age of 41, Jefferson, a widower, alone except for his daughters, was transported to the very heart of civilized Europe.

From the point of view of the Parisians who met him, including Maria Cosway, there was the drama of encountering a highly intelligent stranger from an exotic background who rapidly became one of them. As Franklin was fond of saying, Paris changes everybody. For the first time in his life, Jefferson was exposed to complex architecture, to concerts, to galleries of paintings, to kings and queens. He learned to move according to the graceful,

stylized rituals of a polished aristocratic world, and at the same time the author of the Declaration of Independence confronted squalid peasant huts and the almost feudal oppression of the poor, practically outside his door on the Champs-Élysées. (The quintessentially American house at Monticello is an especially visible result of his education. He used to sit in the Tuileries gardens and watch the construction on the Left Bank of the Hôtel de Salm, now the Palais de la Légion d'Honneur. When he came home to Virginia, he swept aside the existing plans for his house and redesigned it to include the beautiful white dome of the hotel.)

My plot, I decided, would be this journey and transformation, and the tribal history behind it would be the clash between America and Europe, perhaps the oldest and richest theme in our national literature.

The earliest occurrence of the term “historical novel” known to me dates from 1804, when an obscure English sailor named John Davis published an imaginative account of the 17th-century romance between Pocahontas and Captain John Smith and called it *The First Settlers of Virginia, An Historical Novel*. Not long afterward, in 1814, the true modern version of the genre was inaugurated by Sir Walter Scott with *Waverley*. To the general principles found in Homer, Scott added two: He gave us the idea that a novel is “historical” only if its action takes place at least half a century before its publication. And he insisted on a complete and uncompromising realism, a nearly archaeological fidelity to historical research and antiquarian detail.

In Paris, I came to see that to employ these principles, a historical novelist would require two very different aids, so to speak—a bridge and a telescope. The bridge is needed to provide, for the contemporary reader, a way over and into the past, and it usually takes the form of a character, real or invented, who has something of a modern sensibility, someone who, in his attitudes and voice, is more like us. For my purposes, after some trial and error with Jefferson's two daughters, I settled on his real-life personal secretary and fellow Virginian, William Short, who adored Jefferson but, inoculated with the ideals and energy of the French Revolution, broke almost bitterly with him on the issue of slavery.

Meantime, the telescope was ready to hand. While living in Paris and reading everything I could about Jefferson's life there, I also went to see the old convent on the rue de



Maria Cosway, the dishy young wife of painter Richard Cosway, beguiled Thomas Jefferson while he was in France. Though theirs was strictly a Paris affair, Jefferson hung this engraving of her in a Monticello family sitting room.

Grenelle where his daughters had gone to school. I sought out the buildings (still there) in the Latin Quarter where he had bought his books. I found the house where John Adams had lived, and studied the view Franklin had enjoyed from his residence in Neuilly. I pored over old maps, newspapers, paintings, snuffbox lids. “Research rapture,” as the novelist Oakley Hall calls it, is an occupational hazard of the historical novelist, the overwhelming temptation to include everything you’ve learned and recorded on your three-by-five index cards, just because the learning was so much fun.

I discovered, for example, in a letter home from Abigail Adams to her sister, how French servants sometimes scrubbed the floors. This I put into the opening chapter of the novel, as observed by the youthful William Short while he crosses a room in Jefferson's house: “The truth was, Short couldn't be irritated long at anything French, not even the weather. From wig to calf the footman was beautifully dressed in Jefferson's red livery, with gold buttons, gold epaulets, and even an inch of too-expensive, dandified white lace at the collar and cuffs, but in place of shoes this sophisticated Gallic being had strapped on his feet . . . a pair of huge white soapy scrub brushes. He looked exactly as if he were

standing in all his glory barefoot on two melting cakes of snow. Lace and epaulets aside, however, he was merely Jefferson's official *frotteur*; the servant assigned to polish and wax the wooden floors, which, with inimitable French gaiety he did by putting on his brushes and gliding up and down the hallways, hands behind his back, like a skater on a pond."

But there is another sense in which the writer of historical fiction wants to be realistic. Perhaps the single most interesting and suggestive fact I know about nov-

telling observation. The historical novelist tries to do this too, but, without familiar things at hand, reaches for some curious but concrete fact about the daily past, such as the *frotteurs* in Jefferson's Paris house, which is sometimes sufficient all by itself to surprise a lost time back to life.

But this phrase suggests something more profound and universal than a simple trick of craft or research in an almanac. It is worth thinking for a moment about why you want to bring the past back to life at all. Perhaps for

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the reason offered by Edmund Burke, that we have a moral duty to keep history warm and alive in our minds, to brood over it, because the past is an organic thing growing into us, or, to change the image, because it is the soil we are rooted in.

els is this: When he was writing *Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding set a scene on November 28, 1745, not long after sunset, as, according to the novel, the full moon rose. Historical records show that there was indeed a full moon on November 28, 1745, and that it rose at just the time Fielding had it rise. In his biography of the novelist, Wilbur Cross confirms that "Fielding, in his aim to give an air of perfect reality to *Tom Jones*, actually consulted an almanac for his sun and moon." This is an amazing thing to ponder—why would Fielding go to so much trouble? What difference could it possibly make to a reader? Who but the most obsessive and meticulous scholar would ever know?

One answer may be that the ultimate goal of the novelist, any novelist, is not "creation" or "creativity," as those words are so carelessly used. The goal is *mimesis*—imitation so complete and faithful to experience, so widely connected to the larger order of things, even of sun, moon, and stars, that imitation at its furthest point of accuracy passes over and becomes truth.

Another way to put this is to recall the expression often used in talking about historical novels: "They bring the past to life." We don't say that a writer such as John Updike "brings the present to life." The contemporary novelist sees ordinary things, familiar to us all, and animates them with a figure of speech, a driving plot, a

There are other reasons, of course. Henry James spoke of the mysterious, irresistible charm of what he called "the *visible past*," which he regarded as the past of not more than a generation or two ago. Characteristically, voyeuristically, he likens this charm to peering over a wall into someone else's garden. And he added that, for him, the Byronic era of *The Aspern Papers* offered the perfect inviting balance of strangeness and intensity. Mark Twain, on the other hand, wrote historical novels such as *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881) and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) because he was so disgusted with the present that he could imagine nothing more delightful than to escape it.

If you incline, as I do, to the Burkean view, there is a beautiful poem by Richard Wilbur that perfectly exemplifies it. In "This Pleasing, Anxious Being," he describes his family around the dinner table when he was a boy:

In no time you are back where safety was,
Spying upon the lambent table where
Good family faces drink the candlelight
As in a manger scene by de la Tour.
Father has finished carving at the sideboard,
And Mother's hand has touched a little bell,
So that, beside her chair, Roberta looms
With serving bowls of yams and succotash.

And then he asks the poignant question “When will they speak or stir?” He answers it himself: “They wait for you to recollect that, / While it lived, the past was a rushed present, fretful and unsure.”

The emotion here is *love*—love for what has been, what has gone, elegiac love for what cannot truly be brought back. And love requires, in the end, not plot, not research, not craft, but art.

Later in the poem Wilbur describes a painter, perched before his easel at the seashore, watching the waves come in and crash, one after the other, and imagines that the painter

... seeing
The marbled surges come to various ruin,
Seeks out of all those waves to build a wave
That shall in blue summation break forever.

The impulse is not so much to recreate time as to halt it in its tracks, to suspend mortality, on a canvas or a page. At its core the impulse to write realistic, truthful historical novels, to bring the past to life, is the same impulse that drove Keats to sit down before his unchanging Grecian urn, or Shakespeare to pray “That in black ink my love may still shine bright.”

With my research in Paris at an end, I had to face the actual process of writing, long delayed, much dreaded. (I agree entirely with Red Smith’s observation that writing is a very easy thing to do—“You just sit in front of a sheet of paper while drops of blood form on your forehead.”) Yet before I could begin I had to deal with the single most important decision a novelist makes. It is a grammatical decision: In which person should I write?

The beginning novelist is always told to narrate in the first person, and it is undeniable that the first person has its attractions—among them immediacy, ease, an automatic involvement of the reader. Most of my crime stories had been in the first person, the logical point of view when the detective is a kind of surrogate novelist, figuring out (in both senses) the plot. As a bonus, there is virtually no risk of writer’s block. I have yet to meet the writer who tires of saying “I.”

But the limitations of the first person are obvious in

a long novel. You cannot range about, you cannot easily develop subplots, you open the door to monotony or tedium. Most historical novels are, in fact, written in the third person—one might say the third-person “epic”—and from many points of view: a minimum, perhaps, of three, as in Gore Vidal’s *Empire* (1987), or as many as a dozen, in Thomas Flanagan’s *Year of the French* (1967). And this is because of that important first Homeric principle. If a novel tells the story of the tribe and the tribe is to be completely represented, you have to include the obscure and the downtrodden as well as the heroic. You need to have the old swineherd Eumaios there to greet Odysseus when he returns to Ithaca. You need Sally Hemings alongside the Master of Monticello.

For me, there was an additional reason to avoid the first person. I had agreed to write about Thomas Jefferson, a man whose life and ideas are known in such detail by millions of people—and who is a personal hero to so many of them—that it would be arrogant, not to say foolhardy, to try to write in his voice. How could I dare?

In the end, I couldn’t. I adopted what I called a carousel of voices or points of view revolving around him—those of his secretary, William Short; his lover, Maria Cosway; his slave and cook, James Hemings; his rival, the great one-legged roué Gouverneur Morris. Whatever else they did in Paris, as the historical records showed, all of them were concerned with the same problem that had bothered me from the first: How are we to understand Jefferson’s elusive, enigmatic, contradictory personality? How do we get close to him and know him?

I telephoned Steve Rubin in New York to explain my plan. And I added that this method, with all its untidiness, had at least the virtue of being realistic, a historical novel faithful to the established facts. We would hear Jefferson’s voice in his own words, culled from his own letters and papers. We would observe his manners and features, from a distance see him move and act on the great transforming stage of Paris. We would come to know him, in other words, from the outside only, not the inside, just as his contemporaries knew him, just as we know anyone. At which point, I hoped, he would begin to speak and stir. In the elusive mysteries of Jefferson’s character I had found the form for my novel.

Then I picked up my pen and sat down to paint. ■