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Interview

'UNRELENTING SUSPENSE': AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN JAKES, CHRONICLER OF THE AMERICAN EPIC

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Civil War Book Review (cwbr): You have achieved prominence as a writer of historical fiction. Do you see your role as primarily literary or historical -- or both?

John Jakes (jj): From the time I made my first sale (a 1500-word short story in 1950), writing an entertaining narrative was my chief goal. It was, that is, until the 1970s, when I began to research and write the first of The Kent Family Chronicles. At that point something new intruded: before starting to write the first volume, *The Bastard* (Jove, ISBN 0515099279, \$7.99 softcover), I decided to think of the novels as perhaps the only books about a given period that someone might read.

The history therefore had to be as correct as conscientious research could make it without devoting a lifetime to it. I have followed that path ever since, with two goals for every novel: the entertaining story and the accurate history. Readers have come to appreciate and expect that duality, and indeed some have said that people have probably learned more history from me than from all the teachers, texts, and scholarly tomes in existence. If even fractionally true, it's flattering, and I'm well rewarded.

cwbr: The North and South Trilogy is your most renowned work. Would you say the novel or the television miniseries had the greater impact on the public's historical consciousness?

jj: In terms of international recognition of both the title and the author, North and South the Miniseries (actually three of them) had the greatest impact, though this was mostly due to the popularity of the stars, notably Patrick Swayze, who is still talked about in connection with the shows. The history in

the films was downplayed, so I suppose as far as the public's "historical consciousness" is concerned, perhaps the books had the greater impact, though I really have no way to judge.

cwbr: Is it ironic that novelists rather than historians often have spawned renewed public interest in the Civil War? Another example would be Ken Burns's famous PBS series, which introduced the conflict to a new generation of Americans?

jj: Yes, it's ironic that popular culture often plays a major part in stimulating public awareness of history. There is an obvious reason. Great masses of people will never, ever read scholarly works, no matter how finely written; may not even know they exist. That's where I come in.

cwbr: Your website [www.johnjakes.com] mentions that you are an admirer of Charles Dickens. Has Dickens's work or style influenced your own writing? Have there been other inspirations?

jj: I think Dickens influenced my writing in the sense that he was such a marvelous delineator of character, creating unforgettable people, and he combined this with a strong sense of social justice. Stylistically he was a genius, but very much of his own period; I couldn't write a novel in a similar way even if I had the talent, which I don't. One respect in which my work mirrors Dickens is that I have very strong beliefs about issues I've written about, notably slavery and its consequences.

Major influences on my historical novels are all of those in the genre that I read when I was growing up: Dumas in particular, Scott less so (hard going for me), and some of the great, all but forgotten historical novelists of the 1930s and '40s: Kenneth Roberts, Hervey Allen, Thomas Costain, Samuel Shellabarger. Great storytellers all.

cwbr: In your novels, you use a mixture of fictional and real characters. Are the fictional characters purely fictional or are they partial composites of historical figures combined with fictional elements?

jj: My fictional characters are always that, fictional, though often based in part on real people (seldom famous) encountered during my research. You could say my fictional characters are representative of certain types of people living

and working at the time of the particular story. Orry Main in *The North and South* Trilogy, for instance, is based on no single individual, but very much resembles well-off Carolina rice planters of the period.

cwbr: One reviewer described North and South as a "feat of research." How is the research for your novels conducted?

jj: Full-time research generally accounts for about one-half of the time track for a novel. I begin with very general secondary works about the period, to get a sense of what it's all about -- major events and personages, etc. Usually out of this comes a sense of the specific areas I want to treat in the book. This leads me to further reading on those subjects; secondary sources lead me to the primary sources where I find invaluable detail that gives the story a feeling of immediacy -- reality.

Research never stops during the writing, however. When I write a chapter I'm always consulting computer files, notebooks, and handwritten yellow pads for specific points to include. Fact checking during editing and even proofreading I suppose could be called the final stage of the research process.

cwbr: What makes the Civil War an attractive subject for you to engage as a citizen and a writer?

jj: The appeal of our Civil War is obvious: the inherent drama of American fighting American, in the years of the greatest social change, in the shortest time, in all of our history. My long-held interest in Civil War spying was sparked by reading I did years ago. I always wanted to do a book on the subject, and ultimately this led to *On Secret Service*.

cwbr: How does On Secret Service compare with North and South in terms of its plot, characters, and style? What are the basic elements and devices of any good novel?

jj: *On Secret Service* is about two-thirds the length of *North and South* (Signet, ISBN 0451200810, \$7.99 softcover), the first book of the trilogy; a much leaner work, because the economics of publishing today don't favor great long doorstep books of the kind I've written in the past. Also, I felt that a story focusing on the rather narrow world of espionage could be contained successfully in a shorter book. It seemed to work.

The novel contains no stylistic innovations, because I try not to indulge in them. I believe in the power of good strong declarative sentences. And, since my books are translated all over the world, I don't want to make the translator's job harder.

The elements that contribute to any good novel are those that are often cited: strong, memorable characters, including at least one you care about deeply. Strong narrative drive from the first sentence, paragraph, and page. Unrelenting suspense, not in the sense that suspense is used in talking about crime novels, but the simpler fact of wondering what will happen next: the kind of writing that makes people sit up until 2 a.m. to reach the end of the story.

cwbr: What's next for you, now that you've made a "one-time" return to the Civil War with *On Secret Service*?

jj: Next up is a novel on a subject I've wanted to write about for more than a decade -- the colorful, often tragic history of South Carolina, where I live most of the year. After that, it's my intention to write the third volume of *The Crown Family Saga*, to follow *Homeland* (Signet, ISBN 0451198425, \$7.99 softcover) and *American Dreams* (Signet, ISBN 0451197011, \$7.99 softcover).

*Described as the "godfather of the historical novel" and the "contemporary master of the family saga," John Jakes has authored more than 60 books, including *The North and South Trilogy*. Speaking with Civil War Book Review, he reveals his literary inspirations and a few well-guarded details about his next predicted success, *On Secret Service* (Dutton, ISBN 052594544X, \$24.95 hardcover).*