

Terrible Swift Sword: Long Road to the Sultana

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Review

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Hendricks, Nancy *Terrible Swift Sword: Long Road to the Sultana*. CreateSpace, \$18.37 ISBN 9781507764688

Beautiful Offspring

Of his historical novels Alexander Dumas once said, "True, I have raped history, but it has produced some beautiful offspring," while Napoleon famously contended that "History is set of lies agreed upon." A great deal of literal and metaphorical history can be found between those two quotes, but they suggest that the divide between historical novels and non-fiction history may not be all that large.

Historian, writer and performer Nancy Hendricks' has written a novel about the Sultana disaster that explores the space between fiction and non-fiction. A fictional approach the Sultana story allows Hendricks to explore the tragedy in ways non-fiction cannot. Her *Terrible Swift Sword: Long Road to the Sultana* follows the lives of a variety of people as they make their way through the last months of their lives, culminating in the ship's fateful end.

On April 27, 1865 the *Sultana*, a side-wheel, steam-powered ship, exploded and burned to the water line on the Mississippi River. Three of the ship's four boilers failed, creating a ferociously deadly firestorm that killed approximately 1800 of the ship's 2500 passengers and crew members. Historians have to use words like "approximately" to describe the death toll on the Sultana because no one really knows how many people were on the ship or how many died by in in the explosion, or in the subsequent fire or by drowning. The Sultana remains the most deadly maritime disaster in American history, and yet it is a story few people know.

One of the most striking things about the novel is that the characters in the book are based on people who were actually on the Sultana. Hendricks spent ten years doing research for this novel, tracking down the life stories of as many

passengers as possible. Like Civil War historians who study common soldiers, Hendricks wanted to tell the story of average people, who came from farms and factories, North and South, and through a wide set of circumstances found themselves together on the ill-fated *Sultana*. The novel puts considerable focus on several of the female passengers. One of the most fascinating characters in the novel is a young woman who escaped a house of prostitution in New Orleans, where she was essentially held as a slave. Another character makes her way through the country-side, from North to South in an effort to retrieve her husband, a soldier injured in battle. In telling these stories Hendricks honors women who endured the Civil war with fortitude and bravery, but whose stories are virtually unknown.

Hendricks quite satisfactorily answers the question, "Why is the *Sultana* disaster lost to history, when the Titanic looms so large in our national consciousness?" First, the *Sultana* disaster took place at the end of a long and bloody Civil War. Four years of news of deadly battles and personal losses inured Americans to the death and disaster caused by the *Sultana* explosion. Moreover, John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln two weeks before the disaster and the president's funeral train was two days into its seven state, ten day trip back to Springfield Illinois. The news had little room for anything but the death and funeral of Lincoln. Hendricks novel suggests that most Americans simply could not deal with one more tragedy, one more piece of terrible news, and so ignored or forgot the *Sultana*. The sinking of the Titanic, on the other hand, came in 1912, when the nation had little else of deep import with which to contend.

Fiction, though often dismissed by professional historians as frivolous, light reading, can actually accomplish a number of tasks that a non-fiction monograph cannot. First, if we are going to be honest, and I think we should be (just for fun), historical novels are read by a larger community of readers than most monographs. Historical novels have been around for centuries and in the last few decades have become so popular that they command a good portion of the total fiction market. Also, fiction requires the writer to know a raft of things non-fiction history never considers. To write a novel like *Terrible Swift Sword* Hendricks had to know how people traveled, what people wore, what they ate, how they talked, and much more. All of these details, and more, bring history alive in a way no monograph can.

That said, fiction is not held to the same strict standard of verification and adherence to facts as non-fiction, though as a “maturing” historian I find I care less about “facts” every year. Several decades of practicing history has taught me that the past really is an undiscovered country and that the best any historian can do is sidle up to “truth” and hope not to scare it away.

Also, as any fiction writer can attest, novels take on their own lives and the tales they tell often direct themselves in ways that transform writers into transcribers. This might sound a trifle “lets all dance naked under the moonlight and talk about our dream catchers,” but novelists will tell you they were little more than a conduit for a story that needed telling. Hendricks, for example, intended the novel to have some light-hearted moments but her characters simply would not cooperate. I’m increasingly inclined to entertain the notion that fiction tells stories as true or truer than professional historians’ best intentioned works of non-fiction.

Peg Lamphier is an assistant professor in an interdisciplinary program at California State Polytechnic, Pomona. She has published Kate Chase and William Sprague: Politics and Gender in a Civil War Marriage and Spur Up your Pegasus: Family Letters of Salmon, Kate and Nettie Chase, 1844-1873, a documentary edition of Chase family letters co-edited with Jim McClure and Erika Krieger. She is currently at work on a Civil War and Reconstruction history text book for Blackwell Wiley and the encyclopedia, Women in American History for ABC-Clio.