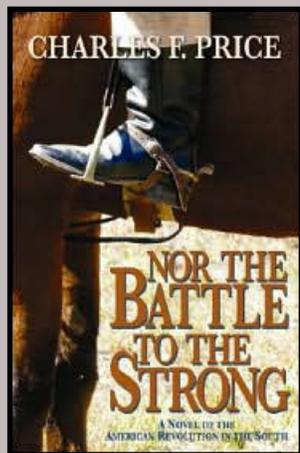


NOR THE BATTLE TO THE STRONG

Charles F. Price, Frederic C. Beil, 2008, \$25.95, hb, 464pp, 9781929490332



This novel of the American Revolution in the South is told from the contrasting viewpoints of Major General Nathaniel Greene and Private James Johnson, a Scottish immigrant and runaway indentured servant. Their lives are both leading toward the 1781 Battle of Eutaw Springs, one of the bloodiest actions of the war.

The men are a study in opposites: Greene is highly educated, Quaker-bred and asthmatic, a plodder pouring over military texts and as quietly eager for fame as the more conspicuous Lighthouse Harry Lee, the beloved thorn in his side. Private Johnson comes with a sprightly sister in tow and is humble, resilient, and unselfconscious, an American Candide on the adventure of his young life. But Johnson has his decency forever corroded by the brutality that marked the war even as he faces a future as a free American.

Nor the Battle to the Strong is a treasure trove of detail (Baron Steuben smells of roses and cloves), vivid characterization, and hard truths about the nature of warfare. It does not shy away from the prejudices that marked the time, and comes with illustrations and maps that are skillfully rendered. Highly recommended.

Eileen Charbonneau

EDITORS' CHOICE

FIRE AT MIDNIGHT

Lisa Marie Wilkinson, Medallion, 2009, \$7.95, pb, 380pp, 9781933836546

Rachael Penrose has been confined to Bedlam by her wicked uncle Victor, who frames her in order to steal her inheritance. Unfortunately for Victor, Rachael isn't insane—nor is she willing to let him take her money and murder her baby brother. She makes her escape and is thrust directly into the arms of Sebastien Falconer, a French smuggler who believes that Rachael is responsible for his problems with the law. Sebastien knows who Rachael is, but he keeps his identity concealed so he can exact his revenge. As Rachael and Sebastien get to know each other better, they realize their attraction. Will they still care for each other when their secrets are revealed, and can Rachael save her brother and her inheritance from her greedy uncle?

The Great Storm of 1703 figures prominently in this historical romance set on the English coast, providing a dramatic backdrop for this suspenseful tale. The romance between Rachael and Sebastien is sensual but not graphic, and the mistaken identity plot, a cornerstone of the romance genre, is handled nicely. There are a number of secondary characters, and an interesting subplot regarding Sebastien's parentage. Overall, this is a fast, enjoyable read set in an atypical era for historical romance.

Nanette Donohue

19th CENTURY

THE CASEBOOK OF VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN

Peter Ackroyd, Chatto & Windus, 2008, 296pp, hb, £16.99, 9780701182953

Peter Ackroyd's fiction has a strong historical rooting, particularly in novels like *Hawksmoor*

and *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, which are set in a Gothic and eerie London. This is a retelling of Mary Shelley's novel, moving Victor Frankenstein the student and scientist to early 19th-century London. Here he becomes friendly with Shelley and Byron and indeed accompanies them and the newly married Mary Shelley on their visit to the Villa Diodati on Lake Geneva, where Mary's novel was famously conceived during a period of prolonged inclement weather.

Dr Frankenstein has a fearful secret in the knowledge that during his experiments with electrical forces in London he has reanimated a corpse, who is now running amok as a fearsome and ugly monster, seeking some form of revenge for his resurrection, haunting Frankenstein with the terrible being he has unleashed.

As expected with Peter Ackroyd, the story is authentically and capably narrated by Frankenstein in the language of the time, utilising plot strands, phrases and patterns of speech from Mary Shelley's novel. As an entertaining and literate tale, the book works, even with a joke or two (i.e., the identity of the monster) and an unexpected twist at the end.

Doug Kemp

DEAREST

Michelangelo Altière, London House, 2007, \$99.99, limited edition hat box (other formats available; see londonhousepublishing.com), 9780980020014

In 1872, Anne, a small-town milliner, meets a wealthy engineer from Pittsburgh while on an Ohioan riverboat. After sharing a meal together, they feel an immediate bond for one another, and once they have reached their respective homes, they begin writing letters back and forth. It is these one hundred-something handwritten letters, newspaper articles and artifacts, tied

together in a hat box, that tell the story of Anne and James. Through Anne's eyes, readers will learn what it is like being a woman in industrial America, and owning a business. She shares with James the intimacies of her daily life—from designing new hats, to teaching her maid to read and write. And in letters from James, we learn the hardships he encounters in the engineering world, and the changes the country undergoes in transportation and technological advancements. The more letters they write, the more they begin to feel for one another, and a romance soon blooms from this correspondence.

Historical fiction at its best, *Dearest* is handmade and available in three different three-dimensional editions. It is the first of a number of "experience novels" by London House Publishing. The unique style certainly is an experience; it makes you feel as if you're snooping into the lives of these two people. As you work your way through the box, the remarkable story of Anne and James unfolds with each letter. The detailed design, organization of letters and articles, and gentle romance intertwined with historical details indicate that this was a carefully researched project, written with passion and love for all things Victorian.

Rebecca Roberts

PRYDE AND THE INFERNAL DEVICE

Malcolm Archibald, Severn House, 2008 (UK)/2009 (US), £18.99/\$27.95, hb, 236pp, 9780727867193

This novel continues the adventures of engineer Matthew Pryde, which began in *Pryde's Rock* (see *HNR* 39, Feb. 2007). In the spring of 1805, Matthew, now a mining engineer in Kent, finds his expertise called upon by those in high places. He is sent to France to look for evidence of an invasion tunnel being dug under the Channel. Accompanying him are the enigmatic Mr Black, and, rather unexpectedly, bluestocking Kate Denton. For Matthew and Kate, this is the beginning of a perilous adventure, which brings them to a close encounter with Madame la Guillotine herself.

The book is well researched—detailing Kentish May Day customs, coal-mining and early steamships—and mostly this fits seamlessly into the narrative. However, there are some awkwardly constructed phrases—Kate does not seem like a woman who would "scamper" or "trot"—and one or two odd similes involving zebras and the tango. The author also makes a number of references to significant events in *Pryde's Rock* which would need further elaboration for someone (like me) who had not read the first book. These quibbles aside, I would recommend this book. It is a real edge-of-the-seat read, with a whiff of villainy and a strong dose of romance. Matthew is an unassuming yet valiant hero, and Kate makes a marvellous heroine: outspoken and brave, but with an interesting vulnerability and her own demons to fight. I would look forward to their future adventures.

Mary Seeley