



A Sailor's Life for Me

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Janet Fisher discusses historical novels about Trafalgar.

Sea stories are a reminder of our long naval history and English literature has a great tradition of historical sea stories from Robert Louis Stevenson and Captain Marryat through C S Forester, Alexander Kent and Patrick O'Brian. Many young people will have watched last year's Trafalgar celebrations in Portsmouth aboard HMS Victory and seen and heard the firing of the ship's guns. Two new sea stories, *Victory* by Susan Cooper and *Secrets of the Fearless* by Elizabeth Laird, do not give the feel of having been written to order for the anniversary of Trafalgar but their arrival is timely. Janet Fisher discusses.

There is no doubt that a well-written and well-researched historical novel can add immeasurably to our knowledge of the people of the past, by making the bare facts of events and the details of their lives come alive.

Victory is a time slip story, centring on the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, which links Molly from the present day to Sam (Samuel Robbins), ship's boy on HMS Victory. This link is revealed very credibly at the end of the book. Molly is an unhappy child, having lost her father and is now coping with her mother's remarriage which has involved moving to Connecticut. Molly is drawn to buy a copy of Southey's biography of Lord Nelson in a secondhand bookshop, in which she finds a piece of cloth identified by a note hidden inside the cover, as a remnant of the ensign of HMS Victory. Molly is able to visit the Victory on a flying visit to England, and while on board 'sees' fragments of the battle fought in 1805. Sam is a boy pressed into service in the Royal Navy who takes part in the Battle of Trafalgar and subsequently marches behind Nelson's coffin. The hardships of life at sea, the comradeship and the excitement and fear engendered by the battle are vividly portrayed. There are no villainous characters on board HMS Victory although one or two unpleasant men, and there is no wicked stepfather for Molly, just a decent man trying to do his best for his new wife and step-daughter. Nelson appears fleetingly in this story and is memorably portrayed, although in a fictitious episode, as he rescues Sam from trouble, and Sam is also a witness to the Admiral's death. Molly's unhappiness, stemming from her father's death at sea and her enforced move from England to America, is resolved believably by love and understanding, not least from her grandfather, and also by the link with Sam.

Elizabeth Laird's **Secrets of the Fearless** is much more of an historical adventure set mainly at sea during the Napoleonic Wars, after the Battle of Trafalgar, using the ship HMS Fearless as a backdrop for a story of spying against the French. John Barr and his father are fleeing Edinburgh, where Mr Barr has made some unlucky financial decisions, but are caught and pressed into service in the Royal Navy. On HMS Fearless John is apprenticed to the Master Gunner where he meets Kit, who provides a twist in the story, and the other crew members. The frightening experience of the Barrs' capture by the press gang is vividly told and John's first few days at sea, bewildered and homesick, are well described. The story dips in the middle after a promising beginning, when John and Kit embark on a mission somewhat implausibly initiated by the Captain, and not long after that, Kit's true identity is revealed, an event which is not unexpected for the reader. The story then becomes an adventure more than a sea story and moves to post-revolutionary France, involving spies and lost estates. John discovers he misses the sea despite his love for Kit, and returns to the ship, and the story ends with the prospect of a sequel involving them both in more spying adventures.

The importance of historical accuracy

It is generally accepted that children and young people need to feel a link with the past in order to fully understand it and historical novels can well make them feel nearer to the people who went before, whether they lived out great events like Trafalgar, or the ordinary life lived by most. There are specific qualities needed by a story set in the past, the most important of which is to ensure historical accuracy. The occasional lack of this essential quality does give rise to some history teachers' distrust of historical fiction as a means to understand our past. In **Victory** for example Nelson's appearances are few, which is reasonably accurate as a boy on the lower decks would not be likely to have encountered the Admiral except from afar. On the other hand, although Sam's rescue from Pickin is fictitious and perhaps a little far-fetched, it does illustrate why Nelson was so loved by his men, and the description of him does tally with portraits and contemporary descriptions. The appearance of a real historical figure does reinforce the setting of the story, either featuring in real events such as Trafalgar or taking part in fictitious adventures.

The use of language also plays an important part; modern words coming out of the mouth of a 19th-century sailor would not add to the credibility of the story. Oddly enough the one example of jarring language comes from the mouth of a 21st-century woman in **Victory** when she says 'Cor blimey': not an expression heard much nowadays. Elizabeth Laird does let the language slip into a caricature of a Frenchman of any century speaking English with much use of the apostrophe, which is unnecessary and detracts from the story. Otherwise for both stories the language rings true, different enough in the arrangement of the words to feel as though spoken in the past but not so different as to be incomprehensible.

Imparting detail without giving the reader indigestion is difficult, but what makes the past so fascinating is the detailed description of clothing, what people ate, how often they washed, the hours they worked and how they were treated by their officers and comrades. Susan Cooper has obviously done her research well, especially on the food eaten, revealed in descriptions of Sam's work in the galley. The use of vinegar to disguise the taste of stale water remains in my mind. **Secrets of the Fearless** too has considerable detail of life above and below deck. The description of John's first terrifying climb up the mast and into the sails, amid the swaying of the ship when he was only 12 years old, will make the life of a ship's boy very real to today's young people. The harshness of the life at sea is portrayed vividly in both books which does help make the experiences recounted more accessible to today's young readers ? and possibly make them wonder how they would have survived.

A sense of place

The sense of place is also particularly important in an historical story and authors such as Rosemary Sutcliff, Barbara Willard and Theresa Tomlinson have made certain areas their own. With Sutcliff it is the Sussex Downs and Hadrian's Wall; Barbara Willard's books are set in Ashdown Forest in Sussex, and Theresa Tomlinson uses the north-east coast of England. In **Victory** and **Secrets of the Fearless**, the place is the sea and in both books the reader is made aware, sometimes uncomfortably so, of its depths, mood and movement. The constant noise of the ships at sea, with the wind, the creak of the timbers, and the sheer power of the weather are all vividly described. Molly's experience of falling overboard off the coast of Connecticut, when 'she can see nothing but green water' (p.11), is echoed first in her discovery that her father drowned, and then mirrored in the bodies slipping over the side during the Battle of Trafalgar when there was not time for a service.

The setting of the scene is neatly done by Susan Cooper as the description of Nelson's funeral procession both begins and ends her story. Samuel Robbins and the other members of the crew are revealed in the author's note as real people. Elizabeth Laird has written a brief background to the period together with some details of her great-great-grandfather around whose experiences she wrote her book. Without some historical setting it is difficult to engage with the characters, particularly if the period written about is not so familiar. There is a map in Elizabeth Laird's story but regrettably not in Susan Cooper's **Victory**. How many children would know where Trafalgar actually is? Most historical stories seem to involve a journey and/or a battle but a map is a frequent omission from a novel. Elizabeth Laird's book is also illustrated with small black and white drawings.

Historical fiction can illuminate the past for children and young people but not simply for students of history. KS2 (8-11 year-olds) or KS3 students (11 years and upwards) lucky enough to read **Victory** as part of their English studies would find it an enriching experience. It would be interesting to compare their experience of reading **Victory** with Hester Burton's fine novel of the same event, **Castors away!** (1962). A later edition to the genre is **Powder Monkey** (2005) by Paul Dowsell, the tale of another boy pressed into the Navy of 1800 who serves on the gun decks of HMS Miranda at peace and at war. The battle scenes are terrific and the book gives an enthralling and detailed picture of life on a frigate. Young people might then be encouraged to move on to read C S Forester's Hornblower novels and later encounter Jack Aubrey in Patrick O'Brian's stories.

Like all fiction, historical stories must stand or fall by whether they create a world in which the reader can live for a while. The fact that the world is the past enriches the reader whether studying the period or not. There has been a great deal of historical fiction written almost to order for the various periods of the History area of the National Curriculum (although it is fair to say that it is hard to find a story about the Aztecs!). As with all good fiction these two are very obviously written for other reasons; Elizabeth Laird's **Secrets of the Fearless** has used the bare bones of her ancestor's history for her book, and according to the author's note, Susan Cooper's **Victory** is born out of her admiration for Lord Nelson. A new novel by Susan Cooper has been worth the wait and it is her brief but vivid portrayal of Nelson which stays in this reader's mind.

Janet Fisher is a semi-retired children's and school librarian.

Books discussed:

Secrets of the Fearless by Elizabeth Laird (Macmillan, 1 4050 48905, £12.99 hbk)

Victory by Susan Cooper (The Bodley Head, 0 370 32891 4, £8.99 hbk)

Powder Monkey by Paul Dowsell (Bloomsbury, 0 7475 7704 8, £12.99 hbk)

Castors away! by Hester Burton (o/p but available from Amazon)

Further information about the Victory and the battle of Trafalgar:

<http://www.hms-victory.com>

<http://www.nmm.ac.uk>

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