

Margaret Blair: Spying On The Past

by Miriam Ruff

What do you do when all of history's at your command? If you're author Margaret Whitman Blair, you write the just-released novel "House of Spies" [White Mane Publishing, \$8.95] and use the past to create the future. "Spies" is a sequel to "Brothers at War," the Rockville-based writer's first novel; but while both she and her characters return to the Civil War period, the time travel premise allows the action to predate the 1862 Battle of Antietam when/where the first book was set.

It was Allan Pinkerton, the Union Army's head of Secret Service, who motivated the return. At the end of "Brothers" he had accidentally transported to the 1990s along with our heroes Rob and Jaime Henry, and their friend and romantic interest, the lovely Sarah Singleton. Out of place, out of time, he had to go back. And while he's perhaps most famous today for founding the Pinkerton Detective Agency, Blair believes that "the most interesting point of his career was when he captured Rose Greenhow, the notorious Confederate spy, and placed her under house arrest."

That occurred in August 1861, just after the first Battle of Bull Run (or the Battle of Manassas, depending on which side you were on). A period of uncertainty and suspicion, it formed an ideal framework for Blair's story - not one of brother-against-brother on the battlefield, this time, but one of opposing forces locked in a struggle of intrigue and deceit.

An added bonus, as far as Blair was concerned, was that following Greenhow's capture her house became a prison for many other women suspected as spies. That meant the author could place Sarah close to the center of the story's action and at the same time give us a spy's perspective from the Confederate side of the line. But while she had hoped also to detail Greenhow's later transfer to Old Capitol Prison, a crumbling, bug-, rat-, and sewage-filled fortress, even with time travel the timing was off.

Greenhow was not transferred until January 1862, which meant that Rob, Sarah and Jaime would be trapped in the past for months. For dramatic purposes Blair knew the action had to occur over a much shorter time. The most workable solution was to have Pinkerton throw Rob into Old Capitol as yet another suspected spy. Once firmly in the Union's hold, he could provide us with his own "insider's view" and highlight the enormous differences in conditions between the two locations.

Jaime Henry, who comes back through time to try to rescue Rob and Sarah from Pinkerton's grasp, remains free from the spymaster's clutches, yet he, too, has his share of difficulties. At one point he runs into the "Island Boys," a group of teenage thugs, and needs to be rescued himself. Sweeping Jaime literally off his feet in the process is Thaddeus Lowe, scientist, inventor and Union Army balloonist. Lowe convinces the acrophobic and airsick teenager to accompany him on his surveillance flights across the Washington, D.C. area so they can assess Rebel troop strengths. Jaime doesn't have the heart to refuse, and his involvement actually helps to further the idea of a Balloon Corps, what later became the Union Army's aerial surveillance unit.

With all the spying going on, it's no surprise that a major theme in the book is about learning whom you can trust. "The teenagers," Blair says, "start out pretty straightforward but come to

realize the intricacies of the espionage game.” A prime example occurs when Pinkerton forces Sarah to spy on Rose to gain both her and Rob’s freedom. At first Sarah doesn’t think much about it, but when the two women become friends, she begins to question whether her own predicament justifies betraying a friendship.

Blair’s primary audience of 5th-grade-and-up readers can certainly identify with the concepts of friendship and loyalty, and she integrates them - as well as other weighty issues such as war and the relative nature of evil - effectively into the fast-paced, action-oriented storyline likely to draw them in. She also provides such wonderfully detailed and vivid descriptions of the period - from the construction of familiar buildings and monuments to the tobacco spit and horse droppings that paved Washington’s streets - that you can almost smell the stench of rotting garbage in the humid summer air. It lends a sense of credibility to the characters and their actions and serves up a welcome dose of information with the entertainment.

“Unlike in “Brothers,” there’s no major battle [in “Spies”],” she says, “so I could concentrate on the environment and mood of D.C. There was war fever, and panic that Washington might be invaded. Nervousness, paranoia - it was the perfect environment for spies.”

She’s also included an epilogue, appropriately titled “Whatever Happened To? . . . ;” in it she recounts what became of the real-life characters after her story ends. The information is almost as intriguing as the fiction that came before it, and it definitely should not be missed. Blair herself found the inspiration for her next novel, tentatively called “The Sandcastle,” in the details of Rose Greenhow’s demise. Unlike “Spies,” however, the book will definitely be for adults “because of the subject matter.”

Blair continues to meld past and future in her own life, as well. Following the success of “Brothers” she served on the Executive Board of Directors for Washington Independent Writers, and through that post found a job as a lecturer for Smithsonian Associates. The class title, appropriately enough, is “Writing the Historical Novel: Blending Fact and Fiction.” It’s been a tremendous success.

She also hosts and co-produces “Out of the Past,” a weekly half-hour program that airs on Fairfax Cable’s Channel 10. The interview format allows her to speak directly with “people who have lived or write about the past, or who have knowledge of it” - a definite bonus for “Spies,” she remarks, since she could do a lot of her research right on the air.

There are no plans for another sequel, but she says she’ll return to children’s fiction sometime soon. “I like having modern characters interacting with the past,” and a trip with her son’s 5th grade class gave her the idea for “a modern-day story with a ghost from 18th century Colonial Williamsburg.”

Right now, though, she’s concentrating on teaching and, of course, promoting “House of Spies,” holding book signings at various locations around the area. As to what else the future might hold she doesn’t say, but it seems only reasonable that with her historical bent, the past will necessarily play a part in whatever may come.

Margaret Whitman Blair will appear at Barnes & Noble Booksellers in Rockville on Thursday, June 17th at 6:45 p.m. to sign copies of her book “House of Spies.”

(From The Journal Newspapers (Montgomery County). July 16, 1999.)