

# A Gothic Tale of Revolutionary Amerika



Patrick McGrath  
*Martha Peake*

A NOVEL OF THE  
AMERICAN REVOLUTION

"An uncommon storyteller . . . McGrath demonstrates his trademark ability to probe the layers of the human psyche."

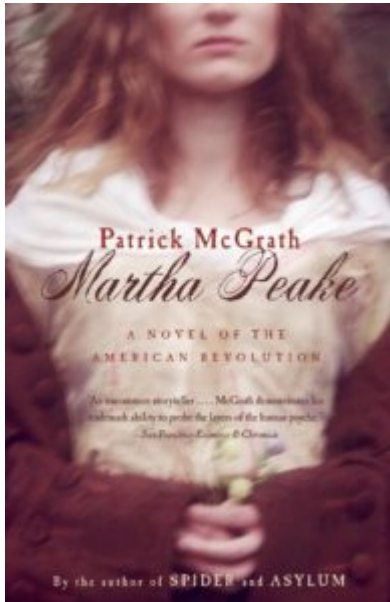
—*San Francisco Examiner & Chronicle*

By the author of SPIDER and ASYLUM

Even during the war, the debates, and the internal conflicts that created the United States, creative artists were wrestling with the interpretive problems their era presented. Perhaps the best-known, and still best-regarded, achievements took form on canvas, in the history paintings and portraiture of Benjamin West, John Singleton Copley, Charles Willson Peale, John Trumbull, and Gilbert Stuart, to name only the top echelon. But as Kenneth Silverman shows in his *Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1976), the American Revolutionary era interested men and women who worked in many other media and genres. These included chamber music, vernacular song, poetry, drama, and the novel.

Despite Washington Irving's tongue-in-cheek suggestion in "Rip Van Winkle" that the whole era was one big yawn, the subject has continued to be compelling, a point noted by Michael Kammen in *A Season of Youth* (New York, 1978). Yet the achievement remains spotty in comparison to what the French Revolution generated. There is no concert-hall music to compare with the Berlioz version of *la Marseillaise* or Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, let alone Beethoven's third symphony, the *Eroica*. Unless we count the musical *1776*, there is no American Revolution opera at all, which stands in contrast to productions as diverse as *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Dialogues des Carmelites*, and most recently *The Ghosts of Versailles*.

Feature film being a historically American form, it ought to have done better. The American Civil War era has inspired major achievements, from *Birth of a Nation* (1915) through *Gone with the Wind* (1939) to *Glory* (1990). The Revolution has given us John Ford's *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939), which turned Walter D. Edmonds' well-researched and politically nuanced novel of the same title into a film about race and sexuality. Ford's *Drums* has its points of interest, especially for the development of the director's extended work in the western genre. Hugh Hudson's *Revolution* (1986) has no interest at all, except in how not to make a historical film. Most recently Roland Emmerich's *The Patriot* realizes its central character fully, shows the problems he faces of indecision and family division, and gets at the sheer brutality of the southern phase of the Revolutionary War. But despite its setting in South Carolina, it fails completely on the problem of slavery, on which the Revolution had a great achievement—by helping to turn it from a given into a problem—and its greatest, obvious failure—by not abolishing it.



Patrick McGrath. *Martha Peake: A Novel of the Revolution*. New York: Random House, 2000, 367pp. \$24.95.

Novelists have done no better. To me, Edmonds' *Drums* remains the best. But from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy* to the present there is nothing to match the power of Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*. Now Patrick McGrath, a highly regarded writer who was born in Britain and who lives both in London and in New York City, has tried again. McGrath's skill in shaping characters and crafting prose is not to be denied. Whether he has transcended previous fictional attempts to make some sense of the American Revolution is another matter.

Unlike *The Spy* or *Drums*, or Kenneth Roberts' *Northwest Passage* (1937), *Martha Peake* has no basis in events that historians can try to reconstruct and interpret. On the contrary, much of the story is presented as latter-day speculation by a first-person narrator who is anything but omniscient. Unlike the central characters in Hudson's failed film and in Emerich's partially successful one, McGrath's central character seems to stand for little beyond her own sorry self. Edmonds did deep research; Hudson ought to have. McGrath seems to have done none. In some passages his prose seems close to Franz Kafka's in *Amerika*: marvelously inventive but having little to do with its ostensible subject.

Much of *Martha Peake* takes place in and around London in the early 1770s. Its setting in time and one character's sympathy for the American cause provide the only link to the Revolution. The narrative shifts to America in 1774 when Martha flees first to Boston and then to a New England fishing village to find refuge with relatives. She finds love as well, but she also finds trouble. One trouble is that she has fled because she is pregnant by her own father, who has raped her in England. Some of the villagers do realize that the child she is carrying was not sired by her gullible Massachusetts beau. The other trouble is that a British officer whom she meets immediately upon her arrival encounters

her again. He knows something of her story, which has become moderately famous in England, and he pressures her into betraying an American secret.

As this bare sketch hints, this book is as much gothic as historical. In the English portion it is explicitly gothic, with dreary swamps, a forbidding mansion inhabited by an evil aristocratic surgeon who dissects "interesting" cadavers, and London life that is straight out of Hogarth. That is not to mention the quasi-incestuous father/daughter relationship, which becomes overtly so in very explicit terms in a graveyard where she has come to aid him in a time of his great danger. Need I add that the father bears a hideous deformity, which has resulted from a botched smuggling venture in Cornwall, that his good life with his devoted daughter falls victim to his relapse from hard-gained sobriety into alcoholism, and that the child whom his daughter conceives is born with the same deformity? It is not overstatement to say that McGrath trots out virtually every genre cliché that a nineteenth-century writer might have used in earnest.

Perhaps that is part of the point. The gothic elements in *Martha Peake* may stand to what Poe, or even Dickens, might have produced, as Prokofiev's first symphony, the "classical," does to Haydn or Mozart: an admiring commentary upon a dead artistic form. Supporting that interpretation, it may be that even within the novel none of the supposed action happened at all. We know from the start, of course, that the book is a fiction. We learn that Martha's whole story is no more than the internal narrator's attempt to make sense of a few pieces of evidence that have crossed back to England. He finds them in the same dreary country house whose family cemetery was, or might have been, the scene of Martha's misfortune. Martha's story is made up not just once, by McGrath as novelist, but twice.

As I noted, McGrath certainly knows how to write. *Martha Peake* has a page-turner quality. But only to a very small extent is it a novel of the American Revolution. Perhaps I am missing McGrath's point. Perhaps he did write a deliberate anachronism, in the spirit of Prokofiev, replete with postmodernist knowingness. Perhaps, in this sense, the whole point of this book is no more than the book itself. Perhaps a mere historian, who envies but who cannot emulate the craft of writing fiction, ought not to be commenting.

But it did seem to me that in the end *Martha Peake* is not a "novel of the Revolution" in the sense that Cooper, Edmonds, and Roberts attempted. At best it is a knowing, fun read. At worst it is little more than silly.

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is *Shane* in the British Film Institute "Film Classics" series.