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Swashbucklers Are Dead... or are they?

Cindy Vallar explores the world of swashbuckling adventure with Lawrence Ellsworth and Nico Lorenzutti.

What do Captain Blood, Zorro, the Musketeers, and Robin Hood have in common? They are swashbucklers - courageous characters fighting for noble causes and wielding swords and wits with equal aplomb. A fan since childhood and an authority on swashbuckling adventure fiction, Lawrence Ellsworth recently compiled The Big Book of Swashbuckling Adventure anthology (Pegasus, 2014).

Ellsworth says these "classic tales of dashing heroes, dastardly villains, and daring escapes," include:

- a hero who's a bit of a rogue but has his own code of honor, an adventurer with laughter on his lips and a flashing sword in his hand. The sword may be optional, but the code of honor is not: this is a genre about oaths and betrayal, about heroes who choose to do the right thing even when it's hard or seemingly suicidal. That said, a swashbuckler is usually a canny lad or lass who's unlikely to follow the most orthodox or straightforward route to a goal. These are the heroes who show a decided preference for escaping with a whole skin.

Nico Lorenzutti, who translates Emilio Salgari's stories so English readers can enjoy this Italian author's many tales, concurs. "The plot is filled with thrills and excitement, twists and turns, battles and escapes. There may be a damsel to rescue (though I find it much more interesting if the damsel is highly resourceful and can fend for herself), and there must be swordplay, tons and tons of swordplay."

While these descriptions solidify the modern meaning of "swashbuckler," Graeme Donald, author of Sticklers, Sideburns & Bikinis, explains the word's origins: "a buckler was a small round shield used both defensively and aggressively in the kind of 14th-century sword fighting in which enthusiasm outweighed finesse. 'Swash' described a scything sword-sweep, and a 'swashbuckler' called for the kind of rhythmical slash-bang of sword and shield in which the most energetic fighter was the victor." By the middle of the 16th century, it defined a swaggering bully or thug, which was eventually applied to books and other media containing characters who portrayed the characteristics previously described.

Sarah Johnson, in her introduction to swashbuckling adventure, says this subgenre of historical novel is declining, but Ellsworth's view is that "the swashbuckler is too appealing to ever really die. Who wouldn't want to face deadly danger with confidence and elan?" Who can deny the thrill of clashing blades, hairbreadth escapes, and daring rescues, of facing vile treachery with dauntless courage and passionate devotion? Escapism? Sure! But a good swashbuckler can be as morally complex as any literary fiction. Look no further than the works of the late Dorothy Dunnett. This doesn't mean, however, that the swashbucklers of yore are the same as those today. Ellsworth says:

Swashbuckling adventure stories have gone through the same evolutions as other familiar types of genre fiction: in recent years we've seen the rise of the anti-hero, greater moral ambiguity, the empowerment of heroines, more attention to the gritty details of history, and a greater diversity in characters and settings. By far the biggest change in the last half-century has been the gradual replacement of historical settings with imaginary worlds. The entire genre has flipped: swashbuckling fantasies are now the norm, and straight historical adventures are almost the exception. Nowadays it's easier to find a cape-and-sword novel set in an Elizabethan alternate-history fantasy world than during the historical invasion of the Spanish Armada.

Whether the setting is fantasy or history, the hero male or female, the protagonist still tends to be no shrinking violet, but a rough outsider with a swaggering air and a ready wit. This evolution doesn't mean that research and history - vital to historical fiction - are any less important in the swashbuckling subgenre. "Eighty to a hundred-fifty years ago, when historical adventures were arguably the leading form of genre entertainment, the best swashbucklers were thoroughly grounded in historical events - and even quickie pulp throwaways paid lip service to the high points of history," Ellsworth explains. "However, even during the period of the swashbuckler's greatest"
popularity, when the average readership probably had a firmer grasp of the elements of history than many do today, the best historical adventure authors made it their business to take the readers back to their chosen era and immerse them in the culture and mores of the time. Read any novel by Dumas, Sabatini, or Stanley Weyman, and I guarantee you’ll come away knowing more about the story’s period and setting than you did before.

“This is still true today,” he continues, “whether the setting is history, alternate history, or straight-up fantasy: the author must carry the reader off to a world that, however new, is solid and credible. If the reader doesn’t buy into your setting, she’s not going to care about your plot or characters.”

A reader with knowledge of the history will find the swashbuckler even more rewarding. That proved the case for me when I reread Rafael Sabatini’s *Captain Blood* in preparation for writing *Captain Blood: The History behind the Novel* for *Pirates and Privateers.* I first read this story in college, but many years later, after more than a decade of studying the Jacobite Rebellions and maritime piracy, I was astounded at how much I had missed or didn’t understand the first time around. Ellsworth adds, “It enables the pleasurable experience of making connections between new facts and what one already knows. It’s an aspect of historical fiction that I love, but which is rarely discussed, which I find strange.”

Although the heyday of the swashbuckler lasted from 1865 through 1935, they actually have been around since long before the American Civil War. “In Western literature,” Ellsworth says, “I’d go with the Robin Hood legends, or even the Arthurian cycle — those knights were always getting their iron panties in a twist over matters of honor and romance. In Asia the genre goes back even further, to the second-century heroes of the Chinese Romance of the Three Kingdoms. The national epics of Korea and Japan follow suit, culminating in the quintessential samurai tale of the Forty-Seven Ronin. Those guys were totally swashbucklers.”

For those readers who enjoy swashbucklers, selecting a favorite is often difficult. I’m hard pressed to decide between Captain Blood and Robin Hood, although perhaps that’s because Errol Flynn played both. When I posed the question to Ellsworth, he responded:

> You would ask that. There are so many. How to choose?

> After three turns around the house, I’ve decided to go with Alexandre Dumas’ four musketeers: d’Artagnan, Athos, Aramis, and Porthos. Each is his own man with a distinct personality, but between them they incarnate all the qualities you could wish in swashbuckling heroes: together, they are unbeatable.

Choosing a favorite author presents an even more challenging question. Ellsworth selected Harold Lamb, an American author of the early 20th century who is remembered most nowadays for his biographies of the strong men of Asian history. However, in the 1920s and 30s he wrote a tall stack of excellent historical adventure stories, tales that broke the prevailing mode by being set in Russia, the Near East, Central Asia, or India during the Mughal Empire. And more, he did this with protagonists who were drawn from those same regions, rather than the usual far-traveling westerners. These were stories with tough-minded characters, fast-moving plots, and exotic settings thoroughly grounded in their time, place, and culture. Most of these tales were recently reprinted in a fine series of collections edited by Howard Andrew Jones; if you like historical adventure, I strongly urge you to give one a try. *Wolf of the Steppes* is a good one to start with.”

Ellsworth confessed that “next week I might choose Dumas, Rafael Sabatini, Dorothy Dunnett, or Patrick O’Brien.”

Not all good swashbuckling characters obey the law. Some are actually outlaws. Ellsworth believes “they’re rugged individualists who choose, for one reason or another, to defy the law — and as outcasts from civilized society, they have to live by their own codes, and stick to them. How they do that usually marks them as men and women of greater integrity than the societies they’ve left behind.”

Whether they adhere to the legal or illegal side of the law, are they idealistic? These heroes need to be true, or at least attempt to be true, to his or her own ideals,” Ellsworth says. “A failure to live up to these ideals, or a fear of such failure, is the driving motive behind many a swashbuckling hero.” As Lorenzutti explains, “It’s fun to cheer for the underdog, and cheer against authority when that authority is corrupt.”

For readers who enjoy swashbuckling adventure or who would like to dip their toes into this thrilling genre, *The Big Book of Swashbuckling Adventure* is a great starting place. Or if you seek a tale that’s a bit more exotic, Lorenzutti recommends Salgari’s Sandokan tales: *The Tigers of Mompracem,* *The Pirates of Malayasia,* and *The King of the Sea.* They’re set in Borneo in the mid-19th century. To my knowledge there are no other adventure novels where the heroes are a band of Malay pirates fighting against the British Empire…Salgari has often been praised for casting non-Europeans as his heroes; his descriptions may not always be politically correct, but they were quite enlightened for his time.”

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**Notes:**

1. To learn more about Lawrence Ellsworth and his book, visit http://.swashbucklingadventure.net/.
6. For my reviews of the Sandokan tales, see http://www.cindyvallar.com/sandokan.html. Readers can also learn more about Emilio Salgari and download sample chapters of the Sandokan tales at http://www.rolexpress.com.

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