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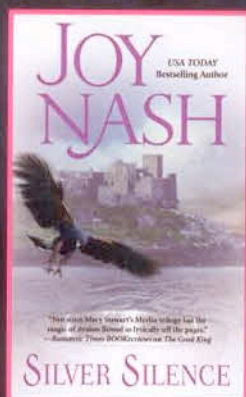
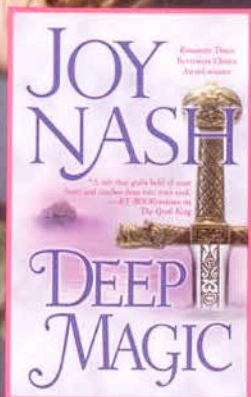
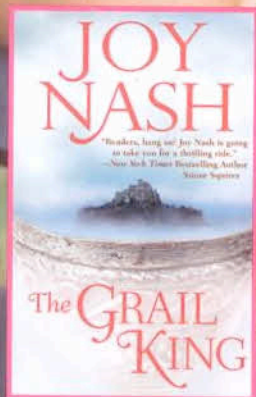
SCOTTISH ROMANCE: WHY WE'RE MAD FOR PLAID

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278 NEW BOOKS REVIEWED & RATED

To Scotland, AMERICAN AUTHORS MINE FAMILY LORE FOR HIGHLAND ROMANCE With Love

By Jean Brittain

NOT SINCE POPULAR breakfast staple Scott's Porridge Oats put the muscular kiltie on their boxes have Highlanders been so popular on cardboard. Readers worldwide cannot get enough of romances set in Scotland, books that are easily recognizable by their covers, which often have on them a length of tartan, a Celtic brooch or a Rob Roy look-alike complete with claymore and an inexplicably shaven chest.

Our wee crofts here in Scotland must be filled with plaid-shawled lassies penning their latest literary exports and raking in the groats, surely?

Surprisingly, no. The majority of people writing these novels live thousands of miles from the distant misty lochs and bluebell glens they write about. As many readers know, Scottish historical romances are written primarily by Americans. Like the saying goes, "You couldn't make it up" — but these ladies do, prolifically, and very well. According to the Romance Writers of America, 21 percent of readers prefer a Scottish setting, while a poll of *RT* subscribers in 2007 found that 49 percent of historical readers love Highland tales. And this love affair isn't limited to U.S. readers; in fact it's transatlantic steam of a whole different kind.

"Scotland-set romances with Scots heroes are very popular in Japan, Brazil, Germany and many other countries," says Hilary Sares, former editor at Kensington Publishing. "They sell in every foreign market there is. They've been around for decades, but the movie *Braveheart* really kicked off the more recent trend, and it has been strong ever since."

As with Mel Gibson's epic film, romances have become a subliminal form of teaching material for Scotland's heritage. Where fiction is based upon fact, it is akin to the re-enactment shows where the odd plastic button on Culloden battlewear is forgiven in the grand scheme of dipping into that time, cheering on the characters and hearing the sounds of real basket hilt swords clashing.

"Historical inaccuracies, if minor and infrequent, don't seem to matter all that much to present-day U.S. readers, most of whom aren't experts in English, Scots or European history," Sares says. "Unlike the writers, who tend to be history buffs."

Well now, do these writers really know their *dirk* from their *sgian dubh*? Oh aye ... and better than many of us born and bred here.

"Quite a number of American authors of Scottish historicals can trace their ancestry back to Scotland," says agent Paige Wheeler of Folio Literary Management. "Since the interest is



there, they have enthusiastically done quite a bit of research which they incorporate into their novels."

"Most of my novels are spun from actual historical events, so the research is very important," says Monica McCarty, who first wrote about Scotland for an academic paper on the Scottish clan system and feudalism while studying at Stanford Law School. Her back-of-the-book author notes give further information on background facts from her books, such as "The War of the One-Eyed Woman," a 17th-century MacLeod feud with the MacDonalds.

At this point, I must tell you that my pal Morag, a MacDonald lass raised on the Isle of Lewis, hadn't heard about this particular feud of her own clan until McCarty's book, *Highlander Untamed*, was released. Morag burst into Gaelic and called her family to break the news.

That's a prime example of author Sandy Blair's belief that "many readers choose historicals not only for their escape value but in hopes of learning something new about a period they find fascinating." Blair consults curators and specialists about such things as costume and weapons, "but books and conversations have their limits. Visiting sites, walking the land, is really the only way to garner a true sense of proportion and flavor."

Veronica Wolff's books are inspired by real figures in Scottish history such as James Graham, the first marquis of Montrose, and warrior Alasdair MacColla. William Rollo, her hero in *Lord of the Highlands*, for instance, was "not so well known — I ended up soliciting the Dunning Parish Historical Society for help." She also finds clan societies have rich archives available.

"Real history is far more interesting than anything I could make up," says Bertrice Small, author of the *Border Chronicles* series, among others. "But you also have to remember that most history has been recorded by men. Have you noticed that women, unless they were someone's wife, mother, sister, daughter or notorious for some reason or other, were rarely mentioned? I read a lot of history to ferret out the facts that might not otherwise be noted. When my readers are through reading one of my books they know a little more history than they did previously, and they were entertained for a brief span of time. My work and I have served a purpose."

Small's great-grandfather was a son of Scotland who never returned home. But his legacy, and those of so many others, lives on in the love for this country as shown by descendants in their writing and shared by readers worldwide.

As Wheeler says, "Scotland is a beautiful country that lends itself to great stories of romance and adventure. American authors tend to romanticize their vision of historical Scotland and its people ... that said, romance readers generally want a romanticized version of the time and place."

That's one reason for my pal Morag MacDonald's enjoyment of the books here in her native land. "They remind me how romantic my country is," she says. "Sometimes we need the grandeur pointed out! Living near Callanish for so long, I took standing stones totally for granted. Honestly, they were just there. A bit of scenery. After reading an American book I realized how special these stones are. Now I'll get out the car to visit every Druid stone I happen across."

The quality of the "Scottish voice" in the American-written romances can make or break a book for natives because we "hear" it in our own accent as we read. Most authors who are in print have gone to great lengths to be authentic, taking a noticeable delight in capturing our phrases, colloqui-

alisms and expletives. Occasionally, though, the authors give us a new Scot word too. I've asked around the country, as yet in vain, for anyone who has heard of the word "doona," used in books by Karen Marie Moning, Lynsay Sands and Kresley Cole for the word "don't." Perhaps it emigrated, as some of our music did. We say "dinna" and "dinnae" for don't, but "doona" is so delicious that several of us have now shamelessly reclaimed it for home use.

"The books are so well written that they've taught me, a Scotswoman, more about my country's history than I ever learned at school here," says reader Alison Cuthill. "American authors are great at capturing our droll sense of humor, the mouthiness of our women and the fierce pride that Scotsmen are famous for. Our menfolk have never been the chattiest in romance. In my courting days a lad would send his pal over to ask you to dance. The brave ones would just grab you, and off you'd go ... girls like to feel irresistible!"

It's an image developed to the full in the novels.

"I think you can trace the enthusiasm for the subgenre to the general popularity of the alpha hero," Wheeler explains. "Scottish heroes tend to come across as strong, sexy and dangerous!"

And in the books readers get that and more.

Blair says her books have "strong, intelligent, goal-oriented heroes with a dry sense of humor — alphas set in a time when men didn't know they had a feminine side, much less worried about getting in touch with it."

"I jokingly refer to them as my strapping lads in plaid," says McCarty, though she adds, "No matter how fantastic on the outside, ultimately what readers really want is that strong inner core — a good guy who might make mistakes, but who does so for the right reasons."

Wolff designs characters who are "strong, uncompromising, rugged ... all words, in fact, that could as easily describe Scotland."

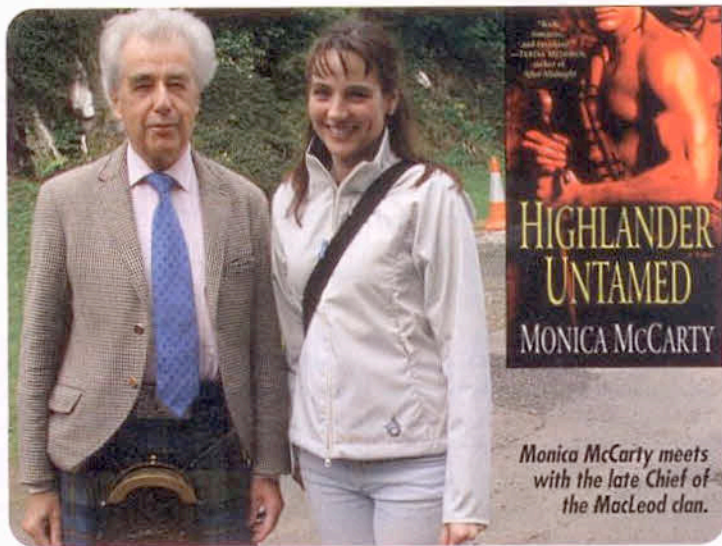
"There are few women alive who can resist the thought of a man in a kilt," says Small, "a strong, loyal and honorable man."

Scotland, past and present, has plenty such heroes to choose from. The lads of our heather hills and hostleries now know what the world's romance readers expect of them — and if real life mirrors fiction, a breacan-feile might well be the beginning

of a happy ending. ♦

Jean Brittain, who loves Scottish romances, was raised beside a 15th-century castle in the village of Ballantrae in Scotland. Previously a bookshop manager and college lecturer, she now writes articles for Scottish Memories magazine, including a monthly feature on folklore. Portions of this article previously appeared in that magazine and are reprinted with permission.

**More Scottish Tales
Continued on page 38**



Monica McCarty meets with the late Chief of the MacLeod clan.

MORE LOVE FOR THE LAIRDS – AND THE LANDS

"WHEN I DECIDED to try my hand at writing, it was one of the first settings I thought of," says Hannah Howell about Scotland, which is indeed the setting of her first book, *Amber Flame*, released in 1988. "It seemed to me it was a plot gold mine," she adds. Since her debut, Howell has set 20 romances, "probably about four" novellas and all seven of her vampire stories for Kensington in Scotland, primarily in the Highlands.

Jennifer Ashley, who's released two Scottish romances and is slated to write two more in her Highland Pleasures series for Berkley, thinks Americans especially feel a "romantic connection" to the Scots and their surroundings. "There's something about the rugged and beautiful scenery and the tenacity of the people that calls to us."

Texas resident Karen Ranney narrows that down even more. The author of 10 Scottish romances, in addition to other historicals set in England and France, sees a "great similarity between the spirit of Texas and the spirit of Scotland. Look at Culloden and the Alamo," she adds, comparing the 1746 rout of Scottish Stuart supporters by the British and the total annihilation of the U.S. Texans in 1836 by Mexican general Santa Anna.

Sue-Ellen Welfonder loves Scotland so much that she uses it as a setting in the medieval-set books she writes using her own name and the modern time-traveling books she writes as Allie Mackay. She's proud of her Scottish ancestry (her father's family came from the Hebrides) but adds, "My passion for Scotland has always been there. It's who I am. It's also the entire inspirational life behind my stories."

Ranney is also of Scottish descent, but she wasn't aware of this until 10 years ago. Even so, her lineage was calling her at a tender age. "I've been fascinated with all things Scottish ever since we lived next door to a man who taught me the Sword Dance when I was 8," she relates, adding that when she ran away from home at 17, she traveled to Scotland, among other places. "Another time I took a trip there and drove through the country. I was horribly lost most of the time, but I discovered that the Scots are remarkably friendly people."

Welfonder visits Scotland "as often as I can" since her days as an airline employee based in Europe allowed her frequent long weekends there. Her all-time favorite Scottish hero is Robert the Bruce. "I've loved him forever and have

even visited all the sites in Scotland that were significant in his life," she says.

Though she has yet to experience Scotland in person, Ashley was inspired by the U.K. TV series *Monarch of the Glen*, which ran for seven seasons starting in 2000. "I encourage anyone who loves Scotland to rent it and bask in the beauty of the scenery," she says of the show, which is set in modern-day Scotland. One of her favorite Scots heroes is Jamie Fraser from the ever-popular *Outlander* series. "Diana Gabaldon writes some hot Highlanders," she says.

"I don't think it's just Highlanders who are fascinating," Ranney notes, adding that she has used other Scottish locales in her books. As far as Scotsman heroes, fictional or otherwise, she doesn't have any. "I cringed when I saw *Braveheart*, because none of the dates made sense," she says. "But shoot, who wouldn't love Sean Connery?"

Howell is also a Connery fan and she adds the Scottish comedian Billy Connolly to her list of hot Scots. "Not only do I adore listening to his accent, but he's really funny," she says. She also is a big fan of the TV show *Highlander*, starring Adrian Paul, and of countless heroes in books. "I would hate to leave anybody out, but I will admit I favor the ones in the paranormal tales at the moment."

Though she too loves "all of Scotland," Welfonder's "most favorite" area is the far north. "I always use settings

that I know and love as I enjoy returning in my mind to these special places when I write," she says. "It is my hope that my deep love for Scotland and all the years of study and travel combine to help me write Scotland with respect, accuracy and passion."

But Welfonder does make an exception: "The dress of medieval Highlanders was very different from the modern-day kilt seen on the covers of Scottish romance novels. Readers, however, adore these kilties and envision them this way."

Authors too. When asked about the appeal of Highlanders, Ashley says, "Men. In kilts. Also, the Highlanders have a reputation for being daring and courageous, and they've survived in a landscape that is both beautiful and dangerous. And men. In kilts." — Liz French

Author websites: HannahHowell.com, JennifersRomances.com, KarenRanney.com, Welfonder.com, AllieMackay.com.

