

The Books Interview: Amanda Foreman

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A *World on Fire* is your second book. Your first, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, was published 12 years ago. What took you so long?

Well, let's see. I signed a contract with HarperCollins way back in 2000. This is a big book, so it was taking a long time. And then I started getting pregnant, and then again, and again, and again. And then my editor left. At that point, I probably should have seen the writing on the wall. The week before my twins were born, it was all very fraught because everything had gone wrong and we knew that I was going to be in hospital for a long time. I got this letter from the lawyers saying, "You're in breach of contract and you have 30 days to pay back your advance or else we'll see you in court." People said to me, "You must sue." But I couldn't talk; I didn't have a legal right. And even if I'd had a legal right, I wouldn't have sued, because it would have been beneath me and, frankly, it's much better to go where you're wanted. I was very lucky: I went to Allen Lane.

And you've already sold the film rights for *A World on Fire*?

Yes, to turn it into a miniseries. This means that each character gets a chance to breathe. It's basically *The Forsyte Saga* in American civil war clothes.

Do you think the civil war still shapes politics in the United States?

Yes and no. The South's relationship to the rest of the United States is very complicated. Texas or Florida is not the same as Mississippi. But certain parts of the South, racially and demographically, are changing quite rapidly now. The terrible poverty of the South is a legacy of the civil war. Reconstruction did it no favours and the South did itself no favours, either. The South was once wholly Democrat and now it's turned Republican. The undercurrent is race and its identity. But it's also the politics of defeat. The legacy of that in American politics is that you can't carry the US without carrying the South. But Barack Obama did manage to carry enough of the South in 2008 to get to the White House. So, obviously, things are changing.

You show how quickly America demilitarised after the civil war ended. So is the nation's martial obsession an artefact of the cold war?

Absolutely. After the First World War, there was massive demilitarisation. Don't forget that, between wars, America has always been very isolationist. And one of George Washington's central tenets was "no standing army". But clearly things have changed in the past 40 years. And I think the trauma of the Vietnam draft was such that they'd rather have the big army than go through all that again.

You've described your method as "history in the round". What does that mean?

It means multiple perspectives on the same storyline. I think that's much truer to our historical experience. Another reason this book took so long is that I spent a very long time making it literary. Every sentence was worked on again and again and again, because I wanted it to read beautifully. I wanted beautiful sentences and beautiful paragraphs. I thought about this book in musical terms all the time. I divided the themes in my head as if I was writing music. The musical analogy was extremely helpful.

Are you working on a new book?

I am, but all I'll say about it is that it will be very obvious when I've done it how *A World on Fire* and *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* are linked. I am fascinated by the Whig history of this country - the Whig families, the Whig politics, the Whig ideology. I want to pursue that.

Are you a Whiggish historian?

No, because I feel so depressed about what's been happening, whereas I'd be a lot happier if I were a Whiggish historian. I don't feel things are getting better. I'm part of the "decline and fall" school. All change is for the worse, even change for the good.

Which contemporary historians do you enjoy reading?

I like reading Niall Ferguson because I know I'm going to learn something. And Richard Evans, because he writes so elegantly. And I love the way Simon Schama writes. He's a true craftsman.