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The wOw Interview: Bestselling Author Amanda Foreman



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1



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Amanda Foreman (photo by Bibi Basch)

The renowned biographer tells wOw about her groundbreaking new book, which illuminates Britain's unsung role in America's Civil War

"A World on Fire" is the long-awaited followup to your bestselling biography, "[Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire](#)" (which in 2008 was made into "[The Duchess](#)," starring Keira Knightly.) This subject seems like quite a departure from the English aristocracy — and one already well trodden in historical literature. What made you decide to take it on?

Although the Civil War is well trodden in historical literature, in fact no one has ever written a book which gives the comprehensive history of the British involvement in the Civil War. That's why it took me so long to write — because every path was new, every story was a mystery story that had to be uncovered first before it could see the light of day.

The spark that led me to the concept for "A World on Fire" happened while I was researching "Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire." I was lucky enough to spend three months in the grand country house known as Chatsworth, where the Devonshires live, and I was given access to all the archives. It turned out that the 8th Duke went to America during the Civil War, and came back thoroughly convinced that the South deserved its independence. But his younger brother, Lord Frederick Cavendish, who had visited America just before the war, remained absolutely convinced that the South had to be defeated in order for slavery to be defeated, and therefore the Union should stand. I was fascinated about how these two brothers could have such different views on the Civil War — and commit themselves to actively working on behalf of their respective causes.

This book tells the story of the American Civil War through firsthand accounts from British men and women — officers and infantryman, surgeons and spies, nurses and wives following their husbands — who volunteered to join the conflict. You've described this approach as "theater in the round." Tell us a little bit about this method.

I wanted to write what I call a 'history-in-the-round'. What I mean by that is a kind of immersive history, so that the more you read, the more you feel that you don't just see the forefront but you also see the backdrop, the wings, side-view, up, and down. And so you are literally in the middle of the action. As a method, it meant researching each and every character as though he or she was the main subject and then boiling all the information down to its essence. It meant that the reader would really feel a sense of familiarity with each character without really knowing why.

You've been working on this book — which runs almost 1000 pages — for a decade. During this time, you had five children and your husband was diagnosed with cancer. When did you find the time to research, let alone write?

I have learned — with much gnashing of teeth — that it is impossible to "do it all" and "have it all." I concentrate on my husband, my work and my children, and that's it. I would like to have a social life and all that kind of stuff, but it just isn't possible right now. But even then, there is never enough time, and I feel that every day somebody or something has been sacrificed, and it makes me feel extremely guilty. What I need is either a wife, or 29 hours in the day, of a twin sister that looks and sounds exactly like me.

When Americans think of the Civil War, they generally don't think of England. What would Americans find most surprising about the British involvement in the War Between the States?

The most surprising aspect of the British involvement is the number of British soldiers who volunteered — on both sides. There were at least 55,000 by most reckonings. That's larger than Lee's army when the South surrendered in 1865.

In conducting your research, what did you find most surprising?

I was shocked to discover that during the Civil War, the U.S. and Britain were so close to starting a third war with one another that British troops were actually getting ready to invade Maine when the two sides kissed and made up.

Did you have a favorite "character" or narrative voice in the course of the book?

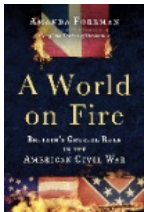
I have two favorite characters – the first is the American diplomat, Benjamin Moran, who ran the U.S. embassy in London. He is exactly like George Constanza from Seinfeld. It's uncanny. Moran was the same kind of appallingly fascinating individual whose self-justifications for really atrocious and selfish behavior are screamingly funny. My other favorite is the Southern femme fatale Rose Greenhow, whose work for the South included seducing the U.S. head of the Senate War Committee in order to get the battle plans for Bull Run.

This book has already been a huge hit in England; the BBC has optioned it as an eight part series, and HBO has expressed a strong interest in co-production. Do you think this kind of complex narrative will be easily adapted to the screen?

The great thing about a mini-series is that it allows for much richer themes and more complicated plots than a traditional movie does. You can have multiple narratives and characters without sacrificing sense. That doesn't mean all 200 characters of "A World on Fire" will make their appearance, of course. But you'll see a lot of them.

Whew! What an achievement to birth this book. Do you already have another project up your sleeve?

At the moment I'm working hard on two projects: the "World on Fire" miniseries, and also a series for the BBC called "The Georgians," which take the concept of Showtime's "[The Tudors](#)" and gives it an eighteenth century twist.



Amanda Foreman is the author of "[A World On Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War](#)," just published by Random House. She's also author of the international bestseller "[Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire](#)." Foreman was born in London, brought up in Los Angeles, and educated in both America and England. She received her doctorate in eighteenth century British History from Oxford University in 1998. Currently a research fellow at Queen Mary, University of London, she is married with five children.



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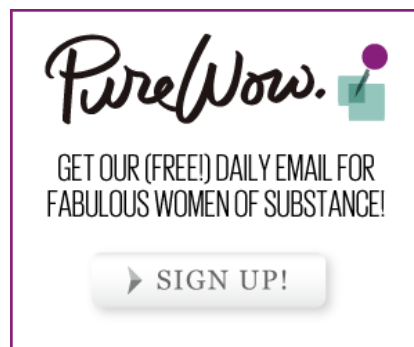


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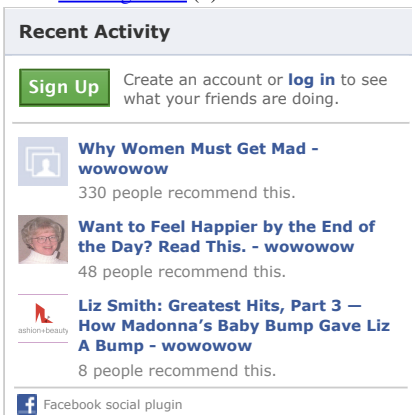
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- [Dear Margo](#) (62)
- [Featured](#) (4)
- [Lifestyle](#) (411)
- [Liz Smith](#) (155)
- [Money](#) (80)
- [Point Of View](#) (302)
- [Question Of The Week](#) (41)
- [Uncategorized](#) (1)



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