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General

A Matter of Honor
William C. Hammond
William C. Hammond III
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By the end of *A Matter of Honor*, its young hero Richard Cutler has acquired an amazing curriculum vitae—perhaps too amazing for some readers. He first appears in 1777 as a Massachusetts teenager, scion of a well-to-do family of merchant traders with deep roots in England. But Richard's grudge against Empire and tyranny runs even deeper: his beloved older brother has been impressed into the Royal Navy, then flogged to death for insubordination. As the book opens, Richard is being sized up as a potential midshipman by none other than John Paul Jones. Before it's done, he will have met and won the respect of such other luminaries as Ben Franklin, John Adams, and the Marquis de Lafayette, not to mention the hearts of both an aristocratic French *mademoiselle* and the beautiful daughter of a British naval officer, former captain of a First-Rate man o'war.

There's eighteen-century nautical lore aplenty, as well as blood-and-thunder famous battles by both land and by sea. The action scenes are vivid and cinematic and the history is accurate, yet there's an oddly fairy-tale quality to the book. For one thing, Richard is simply too resolute, too square-shouldered, and too winning to feel entirely real. For another, hardly anyone pays the least attention to the rigid snobbery and prickly protocols of Georgian England and *Ancien Regime* France, even if they manage to get in the way of the next plot twist.

William C. Hammond III is a literary agent and business consultant, as well as a lifelong history buff and veteran sailor. This is his debut novel, and it's not too hard to envision it as a miniseries, with some up-and-coming Hollywood heartthrob cast as an American version of Ioan Gruffud, the dashing Welsh dreamboat who played Hornblower a few years ago. Next time out, Hammond might consider assigning young Cutler just one or two rendezvouses with destiny instead of half a dozen, but he certainly won't lack for material, what with the Barbary pirates, the War of 1812, and who knows what-all else just over the horizon.