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Allegiances: A Novel

Charles Strout Davis
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The schooner America is surely the most famous vessel in the history of yacht racing. Even confirmed landlubbers probably know the story of how she trounced the cream of England's racing fleet in 1851 and established a competitive tradition still flourishing today. Yet maritime aficionados may be surprised to learn that ten years after her legendary victory she had a second life as a Confederate blockade runner during the Civil War.

Around this fact Davis has built a novel of intrigue, adventure, and romance. His premise is that the Trent Affair, in which a Yankee warship stopped a British vessel on the high seas, seized two Confederate commissioners, and sparked a diplomatic incident, was actually a complicated ploy to bring England into the war on the Southern side. It's a provocative, promising idea, but one which Davis doesn't quite carry off.

Historical novelists face a delicate balancing act: on the one hand, their fiction risks being handcuffed by documented fact; on the other, the desire to spin a good yarn can lead them to play fast and loose with history. In this case, the author's clearly extensive research limits his narrative scope—to all appearances, his account of the voyages of the America is commendably accurate and his notion that the Trent Affair was a cleverly orchestrated scheme is credible, but his fidelity to the record prevents him from inventing much in the way of naval derring-do. At the same time, the mechanics of the plot lead to occasional implausibilities, as when his hero becomes first mate of the America at age eighteen, although his entire sea-going experience seems to have been a single cruise. Also, no young man of that era, however angry, would have addressed his prospective father-in-law as a "hypocritical dork." Such missteps undercut the sense of atmosphere that is one of the chief pleasures of historical novels.

That said, Allegiances—the title refers to the hero's divided loyalty between his home state of Virginia and his own anti-slavery beliefs—does explain and explore the tangle of issues, interests, and ambitions that drove the South to secede and dictated its strategy when war ensued. The Union blockade wreaked havoc on the Confederate economy, and if Southern agents like the Trent's unfortunate passengers, Mason and Slidell, had succeeded in enlisting England as an ally, our national chronicle might be very different. Both in giving dry history a human face and in presenting a rare glimpse of the Civil War at sea, Allegiances fulfills a worthy purpose.
PEYTON MOSS (April 15, 2001)

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