Clarion Review

General

Notorious
James Wassick
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Three Stars (out of Five)

The reformer George William Curtis said, “It is not the ship so much as the skillful sailing that assures the prosperous voyage.” The same could be said of James Wassick’s new novel, *Notorious*. This is a fast-paced read, confidently steered by a smart author through occasionally choppy waters. When Wassick sticks to the facts and keeps his course clear, *Notorious* is smooth sailing.

The emphasis in *Notorious* is on action; it seems that every page contains a fight scene, rising tension, or at the very least, some swashbuckling. The narrative follows the young Edmund Drake and his adventures with his lover, Sarah. Through conspiracy, backstabbing, and revenge, Edmund falls into the company of a pirate crew led by “Scarface” Jack McGinnty. The two men work together to bring down their common enemy, Lord Killingsworth. The cast is a collection of stock characters, but Wassick brings new life to the clichés. McGinnty, for example, is surprisingly honorable—he pays out “inheritances” to the families of his dead crew members. And Killingsworth, despite his overwhelming hamminess, really believes in his own version of justice. *Notorious* sticks closely to familiar genre conventions, though that’s not a liability.

What’s difficult about *Notorious* is the book’s tendency to forget itself. Although it is set in the early 1700s in England and the American Colonies, the characters often speak as though they are on reality TV. For example, at the party where Edmund and Sarah first get reacquainted, Sarah’s friend Nell asks, “So, Edmund, you’re looking good these days. Do you have a girl?” She goes on to say, “Well, you may have met the right one and not have known it. I mean, the right one could be staring you right in the face!” The language of pre-revolutionary England is discarded in favor of casual American slang—a jarring choice for a pirate adventure

novel—and the characterization suffers. However, the setting is vibrant and contains reminders about where and when the novel takes place. For example, Wassick describes the prison where McGinnty is confined:

> *Newgate Prison greeted them on the corner of Newgate Street and Old Bailey. A five-story black hulking building, it was home mostly to debtors, prostitutes, and thieves. The prison itself was grim, almost no one escaped. If overcrowding became a problem, it was quickly resolved with hasty trials and sentences.*

Wassick deftly set the scene, and is generous with the details. When it focuses on history and action, *Notorious* is skillfully sailed.

A fun, fast-paced novel, *Notorious* is a story of love, fellowship, and adventure on the high seas.

Claire Rudy Foster