

Pursuit of Happiness

Sheldon Greene

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Sheldon Greene's *Pursuit of Happiness* is a rousing, richly detailed piece of historical fiction set during the American Revolution. Equal parts adventure and romance, and teeming with colorful characters, the novel tells the story of Joshua Rutledge, a Philadelphia Quaker and cooper's son, and Amelia Sayre, the beautiful wife of a cruel and domineering plantation owner named Duncan.

When the novel opens, both Joshua and Amelia are leading lives of protected innocence; each longs for something more but doesn't know where (or how) to seek fulfillment. Soon the American Revolution impinges on them in ways neither could imagine. A childhood friend calls upon Joshua, an ardent pacifist, to join in the American war effort. George Washington's army has dwindled to a few thousand poorly outfitted men. Resistant at first, Joshua eventually accedes to his friend's appeal and soon finds himself involved in the war as a spy. Remarkably, he obtains the information that leads to Washington's rout of the British in the Battle of Trenton, a victory that breathes new life into the revolution.

The success of Joshua's reconnaissance mission leads to another assignment: to find a large shipment of French arms and escort the cache back through a British blockade of American ports. The journey takes Joshua to Haiti via the fictional island of St. Catherine's. Along the way he meets Alexander Da Costa, the mixed-blood son of a Jewish merchant, and to whom Joshua entrusts half of the arms shipment. Moreover, in St. Catherine's, he falls in love with Amelia, whom he meets immediately upon his arrival.

The narrative build-up to this meeting and the passionate affair that follows is wholly enjoyable. Unlike his first spy mission, however, this second mission proves only half-successful, since only Joshua, and not Alexander, is able to return to the colonies. But within this apparent "failure" lies Joshua's way back to St. Catherine's and Amelia, this time as a marine captain determined to find Alexander and a missing arms shipment that could mean the difference between victory and defeat for American patriots.

As a work of historical fiction, Greene's novel is as meticulously researched as it is conceived and executed. The writer evokes the Revolutionary period, and the people and places of that time, with an artfulness and grace that makes for easy immersion in the novel. Although events seem almost too neatly interconnected at times, Greene's impeccable sense of novelistic pacing, characterization, and plot vividly demonstrates his skill as a literary craftsman, and creates an especially entertaining and memorable read. *Pursuit of Happiness* is as much a story of the colonial quest for independence as it is that of a young man finding his identity and place in the world.

MAUDE ADJARIAN (February 17, 2011)

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