

I write historical fiction and I also write literary fiction. From experience, I can state that historical fiction is harder to do, for there the writer's imagination is constrained—or should be—by unalterable facts. Before all else stands the responsibility to be accurate.

On October 7, 1780, at Kings Mountain, a forested plateau on the border between the Carolinas, an army of Rebel militias and Over Mountain men inflicted total defeat upon a Loyalist army commanded by a charismatic Scot, Major Patrick Ferguson. Ferguson is alleged to have bragged, "I will be on Kings Mountain. I will be king of the mountain, and God Almighty cannot drive me from it." If true, this was prophetic, for his body rests there still.

The defeat at Kings Mountain was a disaster for the British. But the writer of historical fiction, with invented characters to drive the plot, can make something positive come from the darkest tragedy. And that is what I have tried to do. In my young adult novel *Broken Trail* the thirteen-year-old protagonist finds his long-lost brother, wounded and held prisoner after the battle. He saves his brother's life. Not only that, but at his darkest hour, hiding in a washout cavity under the roots of a great tree in the South Carolina floodplain, he is granted a sign that there will be some noble purpose for his life.



*Jean, talking with Tony Youmans, Director, Old Exchange Museum, Charleston, South Carolina*



*Patrick Ferguson's grave, King's Mountain, South Carolina*

In a coming-of-age novel, such as *Broken Trail*, the reader sees the world through the eyes of the central character, the protagonist. For this to happen, the author must not only create the character but also crawl inside his head and stay there until the story is done. This may sound surreal, but the writer has no choice but to participate in everything that the character sees, hears, smells, tastes and feels. For this to be possible, the writer must share the character's understanding of the world.

In my first historical novel *The Way Lies North* I had to inhabit the mind of a fifteen-year-old Loyalist girl experiencing the loss of loved ones and of her home. In *Broken Trail* I had to imagine the experience of a white boy adopted by the Oneidas, a boy torn between the Oneida people who have become his beloved family and his earlier life before he was captured.

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To know this hybrid boy, I had to learn everything I could about ordinary small-town life in the Mohawk Valley in the 1770's. I also had to immerse myself in the traditional culture of the Oneida people, one of the Six Nations of the Iroquois, in order to learn everything I could about their values, customs, ceremonies, food, clothing, and ways of waging war.

My debt to the scholarship of historians is enormous. But just as great is my debt to the men who were there at the time, men whose letters and journals shed light onto what they were thinking at the very time these historical events occurred. From their accounts I formed my assessment of Major Patrick Ferguson. He never appears in the novel, for my practice is to keep actual historical figures offstage. The reader knows about him just as I know about him—from what others recount. A brilliant leader. A flawed genius who invented a new kind of rifle but lost an army.



*Death of Patrick Ferguson*

As for the experience of those Loyalist soldiers who survived the Battle of Kings Mountain—and those who did not—my major source was *The Diary of Lieutenant Anthony Allaire* of the Loyal American Regiment. It is a readable, detailed and gripping account of what happened in the aftermath of the battle.

All my research and what I shall call “history immersion” took about two years. It was time and effort well spent if, after reading the finished book, the reader feels that I “got it right.”

*Jean Rae Baxter's Loyalist trilogy began with The Way Lies North (2007). The second novel, Broken Trail, was published in February 2011. The third and final book, The Runaways, will be released in the spring of 2012. She is also the author of a short-story collection A Twist of Malice and a literary mystery Looking for Cardenio.*

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