

WORLD WAR II BOOKS

by

Carolyn Hart

As a child growing up in Oklahoma during World War II, big, black, often grim headlines in the newspaper were a daily reminder, bombs were falling, men were dying, victory seemed far distant. The days were marked by clipped tones of news announcers on radio, bond drives, rationing, the scarcity of tires and limited availability of gasoline, news of family members in the service, Gold Stars in shop windows and mourning faces.

I was an adult before I realized the phrase *for the duration* meant for the duration of the war. To a child, for the duration was yesterday, now, and tomorrow.

The war changed lives, including mine. The huge black headlines convinced me that nothing was more important than the news, that being a reporter was important, that it was a solemn duty and obligation to bring facts, uncorrupted, true, unbiased information, to readers.

I decided when I was eleven that I would be a reporter. I never wavered in that goal, working on school newspapers, majoring in journalism at the University of Oklahoma, working on the *Oklahoma Daily* and later on *The Norman Transcript*.

My admiration for superb journalists and the importance of their integrity has also never wavered. But life held a different avenue for me than working on a newspaper. I enjoyed writing news stories and features but I realized early on

that I didn't have the brash, steely personality necessary for a good reporter. There are many different ways to write honestly and with integrity. I turned to fiction which also leads readers to truth.

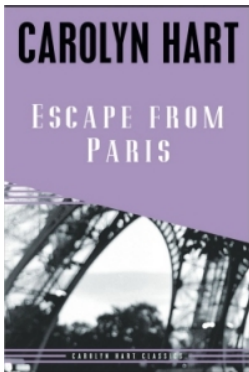
The effect of WWII went beyond attracting me to writing. As a high school and college student and young adult I read and read and read about WWII. I learned about the London Blitz, SOE, the Occupation of France, the French Underground, Pearl Harbor, the fall of the Philippines. I read because I wanted to understand the world that had formed me and, finally, I read because I recognized the heroism of ordinary people, people who just wanted to have lives and loves and family and work but who were caught up in the tumult of horror and fear that was the war. Ordinary people did the best they could to survive and oftentimes they saved others from destruction to their own peril. They inspired me. They still inspire me. I have used their times and their bravery to write about the days they lived and many of them died.

That reading and that respect led me to write several WWII novels.

A Settling of Accounts is the story of a Kay Emory. As a young SOE agent in France, she survived betrayal. Twenty years later, she returns to London. The man who betrayed her and their circle is a successful art dealer under a false name. He is desperate to prevent Kay from revealing his identity. Kay twists and turns to escape danger and, in the end, she once again saves another and brings vengeance.



Escape from Paris is the story of Linda Rossiter and Eleanor Masson, two American sisters caught in Paris after it fell to the Germans in 1940. As England braces for invasion and Europe is overrun by the German armies, Eleanor and Linda risk their lives to save downed British airmen from the Gestapo. This public

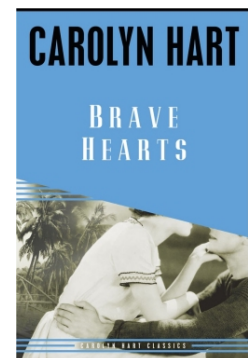


notice was posted everywhere: “All persons harbouring English soldiers must deliver same to the nearest Kommandantur not later than 20 October 1940. Those persons who continue to harbour Englishmen after this date without having notified the authorities will be shot.” On Christmas Eve, the Gestapo sets a trap for Eleanor and Linda and death is only a step behind.

I read not only about the war in Europe, but also about the hard, brutal campaigns in the Pacific. I had great admiration for the heroic American nurses who were captured on Corregidor after the Philippines fell to the Japanese. I wanted to write a non-fiction account of their capture, imprisonment, and ultimate release. However, at that time, their papers were not open to public scrutiny. Since then, the papers were made public.

Elizabeth Norman has written their story in *We Band of Angels*, a gripping and wonderful book.

I’d done mounds of research about the fall of the Philippines and the nurses on Corregidor. I used that material to create *Brave Hearts*. Catherine Cavanaugh is the wife of an American diplomat stationed in London in 1940. Catharine and Spencer maintain the facade of a marriage because of his position but they are estranged. During the Blitz, Catharine meets Jack Maguire, an American newspaperman, and they fall in love. Catharine wants to divorce Spencer. He is suddenly offered a promotion to a post in Manila but it is required that his wife accompany him, as a public show of American confidence in the safety of the Philippines. Catharine believes it is her duty and she agrees to go with him. Jack Maguire heads for the Philippines without a job, without prospects, determined to convince Catharine to pursue a



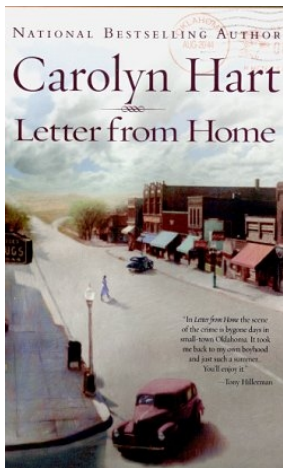
divorce. The Japanese invade, Manila falls, and Catharine and other diplomatic personnel escape to the island of Corregidor, which has been turned into a fortress with a huge underground hospital. Catharine and other diplomatic wives volunteer in the hospital as the Japanese bombardment of the island rocks the cavern below, creates devastation on the island's surface. Eventually, Catharine, Spencer and a small party, including Jack Maguire, leave Corregidor and strike out and cross the bay to the big island of Mindanao. They head into the jungle, trying to elude the Japanese pursuit.

The three books have more in common than a setting against the backdrop of World War II. Each book and its contents, though the characters and action are fictional, are based on fact and are historically accurate. What you read is what happened and the characters reflect the attitudes and mores of those particular times.

And that brings me to *Letter from Home*, written many years after my other WWII books. In 2001 Hollywood put out *Pearl Harbor*, a film that purported to portray the early days of World War II and in particular the unexpected attack by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor,

I can say unequivocally that the movie is absurd. The writers and director took the attitudes and mores of the 21st century and presented the action through that lens. The characters in the film have the cultural values of today, not the cultural values of the nineteen-forties, a time when convention ruled actions, when people were held to particular standards of conduct, when it went without saying that adultery was a grave sin. That isn't to say there was no adultery but you can be certain that it was never flaunted and that sexual license didn't exist.

I was profoundly disappointed by the film. I thought it was a shame that readers, many of them born long after the war, would take away a skewed view of those who fought and lived and died during WWII. I decided to write a book that would recreate the feelings of the time. My protagonist is 13-year-old Gretchen Gilman, growing up in a small town in northeastern Oklahoma. She knows that she wants to be a writer and because the war has drained away most of the young men in their small town, she has a chance to work on the local newspaper in the sultry summer of 1944. Gretchen lives with her grandmother, Lotte Pfizer, who owns a small town café. She renamed Pfizer Café the Victory Café after the start of the war. Lotte is often ill at ease because of her German accent.



Letter from Home is the story of Lotte and Gretchen and the girl down the street Barb and her mother, Faye Tatum, a local artist, and the stress war imposes even in a small town far from either coast. Faye Tatum is murdered and a drumbeat of gossip and scandal begins. Gretchen makes many choices that summer. A lifetime later, she and Barb meet once again and find resolution. *Letter from Home* is true to its time while exploring the painful reality that good people can make bad choices and that meaning well often isn't enough.

I have written 58 novels, but the WWII novels, especially *Letter from Home*, hold a special place in my heart.