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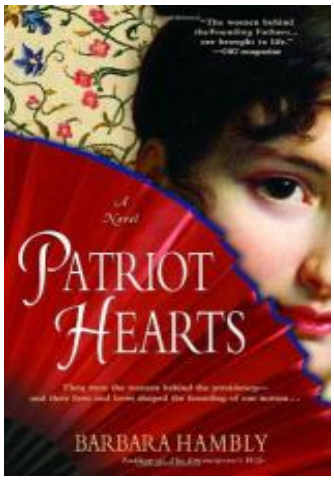
Patriot Hearts

by Barbara Hambly



About the Book

When Martha Dandridge Custis marries her second husband, George, she never suspects that the soft-spoken Virginia planter is destined to command the founding of a nation --- or that she is to be ?Lady Washington,? the woman at the first President?s side. Only a select inner circle of women will know the cost of sharing a beloved man with history . . . and each will draw strength from the unique treasure given to them by a doomed queen.

Seeing farm and family through each harsh New England season, Abigail Adams is sustained only by the fervent reunions stolen between John?s journeys abroad. She will face the terror of an ocean crossing to join her husband in France --- and write her own page in history. And there she will cross paths with kings, commoners --- and young Sally Hemings.

Just as Sally had grown from a clever child to a beautiful woman, so had her relationship with Thomas Jefferson grown from a friendship between slave and master to one entangled in the complexities of black and white, decorum and desire. It is a relationship that will leave Sally to face an agonizingly wrenching choice.

Dolley Madison, too, must live with the repercussions of a forbidden love affair --- although she will confront even greater trials as a President?s wife. But Dolley will become one of the best-loved ladies of the White House --- and leave an extraordinary legacy of her own.

A lushly written novel that traces the marriages tested by the demands of
love and loyalty, **Patriot Hearts** offers readers a dazzling glimpse behind the scenes of a revolution, from adversity and treachery to teatime strategies, as four magnificent women shape a nation?s future.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the experience of reading historical fiction. What can a novel capture that a documentary or nonfiction book cannot? How does imaginative storytelling enhance our understanding of history?

2. How did your perception of the founding mothers change after reading **Patriot Hearts**? Do you believe most Americans have an accurate perception of them? What distinctions are usually made between the accomplishments of the founding fathers and those of the women who were central in their lives?

3. What did it take to earn Martha Washington?s respect (something James Madison had trouble achieving)? How did her previous marriage, and the process of being a grieving mother, shape her view of the world?

4. What do you believe fueled Abigail Adams?s fiery dedication to the Patriot cause? What made her such an ideal match for John?

5. How did you react to the scene of Nabby?s childbirth experience in England? How might the high mortality rates of mothers and newborns have given colonial women an outlook on motherhood that is different from ours?

6. What are your theories about Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson? What choices would you have made in her position? How would you explain the many contradictions that existed in his political and personal lives?

7. Would you have been as reluctant as Dolley to marry John Todd? How did she reconcile the obligations of the Quaker community (including abolition and nonviolence) with her fate? How did the spectrum of religious opinions in America shape her life?

8. From their inability to vote to the etiquette that prevented the discussion of politics at a dinner table, the women featured in **Patriot Hearts** experienced limited options in terms of shaping policy. What was the source of their power? When the author gives Martha Washington the line that ?it *is* the women who actually run things,? what tactics is she referring to?

9. The novel?s epigraph highlights John Adams?s exasperation with his children. What did you discover about early American family life by reading **Patriot Hearts**? How were stepfamilies managed? Where did the balance of authority between fathers and mothers lie?

10. What were your reactions to the realities of slavery depicted in the novel? What did the novel demonstrate about planters who were reluctant to free their slaves?

11. Were you surprised to discover the high instability that existed in America after the revolution, from currency problems and feuding states to the absence of clear political parties and the creation of unconstitutional acts while the framers were still alive? How did the novel?s creative timeline, woven with flashbacks, enhance your understanding of the turmoil that brewed well into the nineteenth century?

12. Who are the contemporary equivalents of the women featured in **Patriot Hearts**? How has the notion of a first lady changed since the Federalist period? Would economic empowerment alone have led Martha, Dolley, Abigail, and Sally to make even more daring life choices?

13. Discuss the role of the mirror sent by Marie Antoinette. What are its ominous qualities, in light of the queen?s execution amid revolution? What bridge does it serve between monarchy and democracy? What varying faces does it capture as it is passed through the novel?s inner circle?

14. Which of the women in the novel did you most identify with? If all four women were guests of your book club, what questions would you most want to ask them? What do you think their responses might be?

15. The novel?s epilogue, postscriptum, and cast of characters describe the surprisingly bleak outcomes for many of these luminaries and their descendants. What accounts for these sometimes tremendous gaps between historic achievement and personal failure, in terms of debt or an unrealized dream? Which of these legacies inspired descendants to achieve even greater victories?

16. What threads link **Patriot Hearts** to Barbara Hambly?s previous novels? What shapes her approach in crafting memorable characters and proposing intriguing ?what if? scenarios?

Author Bio

Barbara Hambly attended the University of California and spent a year at the University of Bordeaux, France, obtaining a master's degree in medieval history. She has worked as both a teacher and a technical editor, but her first love has always been history. Ms. Hambly lives in Los Angeles, where she is at work on the sixth *Benjamin January* novel, WET GRAVE.

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