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Book reviews

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Sunday, December 16, 2007

The Pirate Queen

Reviewed by [Mel Odom](#)

I love history and I love pirates. Thankfully history never goes away and pirates are more popular than ever. I grew up on stories of Sir Francis Drake, the most prominent of her majesty the queen's privateer, who took his letters of marquee and seized a place in legend for himself. But I never really got into the true story about the man until I was more grown up. By then I was majoring in history in college and found the stories even more interesting because I recognized them as men who had to overcome their fears before they became swashbuckling heroes.

I was, however, guilty of not thinking overmuch about the lady that gave men like Drake the chance to become my childhood heroes. Her journey, her decisions, were – upon reflection – even harder and more awe-inspiring than her privateers.

Called the Virgin Queen, and that must have been a hard one to deal with back in her day, Elizabeth I rose to the throne a month after she turned 25. She was the daughter of Anne Boleyn, who was beheaded at the order of her husband Henry VIII. A beheading served as a divorce at the time because the Anglican Church hadn't instituted divorce as acceptable.

For a while, Elizabeth was declared illegitimate and had no shot at the throne. That struggle was only one of many she faced, as well as religious problems within the nation and war with Spain.

Historian Susan Ronald brings all of the adventure and excitement of Elizabeth I's life to the pages of *The Pirate Queen: Elizabeth I, Her Daring Adventurers, and the Dawn of Empire*. I'm ADHD and even though I love history, I oftentimes find wading through "scholarly" approaches to material I'm interested in very hard reading. My attention span wanders and I lose track in the middle of baroque sentences.

This isn't so with Ronald's book. She effectively nailed me to the pages with her engrossing spinning of Elizabeth I's trials and travails. When I first hefted the book, and it is certainly hefty, I have to admit to being somewhat daunted. But then I began turning the pages. And kept turning the pages.

Elizabeth I's struggles to right the English economy, deal with controversy over her lineage and the religious changes she made, all became drama played out in my mind's eye. Ronald painted sets with her words, and the people came to life. Reading this book is effortless, and it provides a splendid study of that time and the people involved.

I'd been fascinated by the Spanish Armada and how it was destroyed in 1588, but I hadn't really felt all that was at stake if they'd won against England. The Cold War that played out between Russia and the United States between 1950s-1980s had nothing on the conflict that took place on the Atlantic Ocean during Elizabeth's reign.

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Although the book focuses a lot on the Queen's privateers – legalized pirates by any other name – much time is spent with her relationship with Robert Dudley, the Earl of Liecester, Thomas Seymore – who was her guardian for a time, as well as those famous pirates, Sir Francis Drake, and Admiral John Hawkins.

Ronald's book is an armchair historian's dream and a keen, mostly unbiased, look at one of history's most famous and most daring women. If you've ever been interested in pirates or English history during a most dangerous time when history could have flipped in any of several directions, *The Pirate Queen: Elizabeth I, Her Daring Adventurers, and the Dawn of Empire* is definitely a book you should pick up.

Although almost 500 pages long, take heart in the fact that the book is heavily documents and several of those pages are reference. The layout of the book, wide margins and easy-to-read typeface, also make it extremely attractive in this time of microscopic fonts.

Susan Ronald is also the author of *The Saucy Blood Diamond: Power, Greed, and the Cursed History of One of the Worlds Most Coveted Gems*.

Posted by nbennett at 06:23 PM

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