

PATRICK MCGRATH MARTHA PEAKE 2000

Patrick McGrath--author of the critically acclaimed novel **Asylum** and a finalist for England's prestigious Whitbread Prize for fiction--once again spins a hypnotic tale of psychological suspense and haunting beauty.

Set among the teeming streets and desolate wharves of Hogarth's London, then shifting to the powder-keg colony of Massachusetts Bay, **Martha Peake** envelops the reader in a world on the brink of revolution.

Settled with our narrator beside a crackling fire, we hear of the poet and smuggler Harry Peake--how Harry lost his wife, Grace, in a tragic fire that left him horribly disfigured; how he made a living displaying his deformed spine in the alehouses of eighteenth-century London; and how his only solace was his devoted daughter, Martha, who inherited all of his fire but none of his passion for cheap gin.

As the drink eats away at Harry's soul, it opens ancient wounds; when he commits one final act of unspeakable brutality, Martha, fearing for her life, must flee for the American colonies. Once safely on America's shores, Martha immerses herself in the passions of smoldering rebellion.

But even in this land of new beginnings, she is unable to escape the past. Caught up in a web of betrayals, she redeems herself with one final, unforgettable act of courage.

Superbly plotted and wholly absorbing, **Martha Peake** is crafted with the psychological precision Patrick McGrath's fans have come to expect. A writer whose novels *The New York Times Book Review* has called both "mesmerizing" and "brilliant," McGrath applies his remarkable imaginative powers to a fresh and broad historical canvas.

Martha Peake is the poignant, often disturbing tale of a child fighting free of a father's twisted love, and of the colonists' struggle to free themselves from a smothering homeland.

The irony and similarity carries over from personal to political.

"It is a black art, the writing of a history, is it not?" So begins *Martha Peake*, a gripping narrative that takes the reader back to London and America during the revolutionary epoch of the 1770s. Patrick McGrath's sixth work of fiction begins several decades later, when young Ambrose Tree is summoned to visit his dying Uncle William at Drogo Hall. Assuming that he is about to inherit his uncle's estate, he rushes across Lambeth Marsh to the great manor house. Instead, though, he's promptly drawn into his uncle's extraordinary story of Harry Peake and his headstrong young daughter, Martha.

Harry, "to whom Nature in her folly gave the soul of a smuggler, and the tongue of a poet," was a Cornish smuggler, horrifically mutilated in a fire that killed his wife and dispersed his children. Only Martha stood by him.

As the story unfolds, she follows her father to London, where the self-anointed, poetry-spouting "Cripplegate Monster" displays his hideously deformed body in the taverns and watering holes of London's underworld. Soon Harry comes to the sinister attentions of Lord Drogo, who "wanted him for his Museum of Anatomy."

As father and daughter are drawn into this gentleman scientist's world, Harry turns to drink, catastrophically abusing and raping Martha and sending her fleeing to America, pregnant with his child, where she becomes embroiled in the struggle for independence from England.

At this point, the story may seem to have wandered far afield. But as *Martha Peake* reaches its climax, Ambrose realizes that the fate of both parent and child is much closer to home than he could ever have imagined.

Practicing the black art of storytelling to near-perfection, Patrick McGrath has produced a wonderful tale of "sacrifice and abomination and heroism and resolve and victory."

The book's darkness and intermittent grotesquery will cement his New Gothic reputation.

As he demonstrates his trademark ability to probe the layers of the human psyche

"Martha Peake" finds the author setting a tale two centuries in the past, and altering his writing style to fit the conventions of that period. A young man finds himself laid up at his old uncle's manor house (Drogo Hall), and the two of them while away the hours by recalling, and speculating upon, the tale of a local man, Harry Peake, and his daughter, Martha. Harry, a robust young smuggler, is badly injured in a fire, and left with a badly humped and misshapen spine. His spirited daughter is deeply devoted to him, and they seek out a living among the poor of London. Harry has an artistic temperament, and along with writing some fine poetry, is prone to bouts of serious boozing.

Following some painful developments, the girl goes off to New England to make a new life, and finds herself in the middle of the growing fervor of the revolution.

Some of both Martha and Harry's actions make them look quite a bit less than heroic. But this must have partly been the point - the life that McGrath portrays here is not a sanitized one, but has its share of unsaintly behavior - sex, drunkenness, incestuous rape. It is not a colonial era soap opera, however, and neither is it a supernatural chiller, although it contains elements of both.

Martha ultimately finds redemption in an act of heroism, but by that point the astute reader has become aware that he has fallen under the spell of an unreliable narrator. Young Ambrose Tree, who

is telling the tale, has been neurotically fantasizing and embellishing quite a bit, and the truth, when it is finally, but less than completely revealed, is not as gothic and grotesque as he imagined it.

English author Patrick McGrath has been hailed as the master of neo-gothic, but he prefers to describe himself as the creator of "stories of love and madness".

I can say that the gothic and romantic certainly blend seamlessly here. Told by two unreliable narrators, decades afterward, Martha's tale plays out in four 18th century settings, each equally dark and threatening. Harry Peake makes his first appearance in Cornwall, where he's a good looking, hard drinking smuggler who loses his wife and most of his family in a fire that he caused. His own injuries have left him a bitter, hulking hunchback.

of the tale's most vivid images (no spoilers, so I won't elaborate). Martha Peake is a finely crafted, multilayered novel, one that deserves to be savored and considered rather than rushed.

She becomes a cipher for all of the other characters to project their own needs on to. McGrath is able to sustain this for the length of the novel, while still creating an engrossing read. And the novel works as both gothic/psychological thriller and historical novel (romance in the broader sense of the word, though clearly, nearly all of the narrators are in love with their version of Martha as well).

Martha Peake herself illustrates how seldom we know the facts behind all those popular legends which we accept as truth. Her actions once she arrives in America are simplified by others for the cause of those who wish to keep the flame of the Revolution alive before the onslaught of the British Redcoats. It has little to do with Martha's personal tragedy or the real truth behind her actions and prompts the question, "If a 'distortion' of the truth (or, in some

cases, an outright lie) brings about a positive end, is that distortion or lie justified?"

