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COMMENTARY

Hanks: The hot, red-headed Scotsman I loved - then returned

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Call me delusional. I went looking for a fictional character in the real world — and found him. It was the unlikely culmination of a torrid affair I conducted right under my husband's nose. He ignored the warning signs — the bleary eyes, the late nights, my sudden lack of interest in "The Apprentice."

I've spent my nights cavorting with the tall, handsome, red-headed Jamie Fraser, hottie hero of the 20-pound, 7-volume, 2-million-plus word "Outlander" saga (including the Outlandish Companion crib-notes).

While author Diana Gabaldon's series has sold millions of copies in scores of languages since the first book appeared in 1991, it took me years to discover it. Yet, just like heroine Claire Randall, once I found the magic portal, I too was sucked into a time vortex, happily rereading the same seven volumes. Luckily, most of the covers look enough alike that my husband has no idea what I've been doing — and he hasn't checked under the bed, where I've been hiding James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser.

The story begins in Scotland in 1946, where former combat nurse Claire Randall is on a second honeymoon with husband Frank. They chose Scotland because they had been married there and because Frank had an illustrious local ancestor.

While out picking flowers, Claire steps into a miniature Stonehenge and is catapulted 200 years into the past. She lands in the clutches of Frank's villainous ancestor, Jonathan Randall. She's rescued by a band of cattle thieves, mistaken for an English spy, taken back to the castle of one of the powerful clans controlling Scotland and then hooks up with cattle thief Jamie Frasier.

It has been a long time since I finished a book and turned immediately to the beginning to read it again, and again and again . . . then moved on to the next book in the series and read it again and again, and again . . .

As a recovering academic, it was impossible not to read these books with a critical eye, particularly in the second, third and fourth readings. To understand Jamie's appeal, I turn to movie star and unlikely literary analyst Brad Pitt. In *Vanity Fair*, Pitt described the appeal of warrior Achilles in "Troy." "He's extremely violent, but there's a juxtaposition of violence and tenderness." This combination explains Jamie's appeal. He's capable of killing a rogue, then sweet-talking Claire while still blood-splattered. While the rational part of my brain is saying "ewwww," the animal part is eagerly flipping pages.

"Outlander" is narrated from Claire's perspective, making you feel you are Claire, as you look out of golden eyes at a strapping 23-year-old, red-headed, Scottish Catholic virgin whom you are expected to soon deflower. You are there as Claire wonders: "How in the name of God did this happen? I asked myself some time later. Six weeks ago, I had been innocently collecting wildflowers on a Scottish hill to take home to my husband. I was now shut in the room of a rural inn, awaiting a completely different husband, whom I scarcely knew, with firm orders to consummate a forced marriage, at risk of my life and liberty."

Despite my "Outlander" fascination, my ardor has recently cooled. The first three books are the "Old World Trilogy" of "Outlander," "Dragonfly in Amber" and "Voyager." They include the excitement of Loch Ness monster sightings, kidnappings, forced marriages, slave rebellions, failed Scottish coups, etc. In contrast, the latest books — "Drums of Autumn," "The Fiery Cross" and "A Breath of Snow and Ashes" — form the dreary "New World" trilogy. Alas, once middle-aged Jamie and Claire literally wash ashore in America following a shipwreck in Voyager, the excitement washes out of the series.

Deep in the grip of my mania, while staying at a diet clinic in Durham, N.C., I visited the nearby Alamance Battleground, solely because that's where Jamie and Claire fought in the pre-Revolutionary-war "Battle of the Regulators." I wondered whether either of the two other visitors that day shared my reasons for visiting. It certainly wasn't anything I was sharing in the visitors' book.

The Alamance site includes the Allen family's log-cabin. The tour guide explained Mrs. Allen was a rural doctor (like Claire!) while her husband was a community leader (like Jamie!) — information that made my spider sense tingle. I almost expected to walk out of the cabin and into Jamie in 1768. Fortunately, my delusion likely resulted from my severely restricted food intake at the diet center.

I suppose I'll be lonesome for a while without the tall, redheaded warrior. Seeing me distraught, an academic friend suggested easing my "Outlander" dependence with the "Waverly" novels of Scotsman Sir Walter Scott, set in the "Outlander" era. Just my luck. I start off with a bodice-ripper and end up yearning for the classic literature I avoided in school. But as Jamie might purr in his Scottish burr, "I had a verra good time."

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