



North Coast author chronicles wartime spy

How about some 19th century intrigue to help you get through some of the rainy days in the forecast? North Coast author Deb Vanasse, writing under the pen name Vanessa Lind, explores a fascinating facet of the Civil War era in “The Courier’s Wife,” a new historical novel based on the true exploits of a female Civil War spy.

This week’s book

‘The Courier’s Wife’
by Vanessa Lind

Vanessa Lind Books –
280 pp – \$18.99

In the spring of 1862, brash and young Hattie Logan and her more refined friend, Anne, leave finishing school behind and head to Washington, D.C. Their brothers have already left to fight in the war and they, too, want to contribute in some way to the Union effort.

In doing this, Hattie is spitting her parents who, despite living in Indiana, have Confederate sympathies. Anne’s father, however, has good connections on the Union side and secures employment for them in the female division of the Pinkerton Detective Agency. Pinkerton has infiltrated secessionist groups to feed intelligence to Gen. George B. McClellan’s Army of the Potomac.

But if these idealistic women entertained thoughts of becoming spies themselves, those are quickly dashed. Their workplace in the war department is a storage closet converted into a mailroom, and instead of cloak and dagger work, their tools of trade are teakettles and irons.

The job of the so-called Pinkerton girls is to steam open mail brought in by couriers to review it for coded messages or mentions of crucial military intelligence. Those letters are rare,

and when they are discovered, they immediately get passed along to men in a different office who do the deciphering. With all of the other letters, the girls reveal them in their envelopes with a hot iron and send them on their way. Hattie chafes at performing work that is, as she describes, “dull as dirt.”

The occasional exception is whenever one of the Pinkerton couriers comes around to drop off a new batch of mail. Handsome, British-born Thom Welton is one of those. He performs risky work as a secession sympathizer, regularly working behind enemy lines to cultivate sources and report back on Confederate activities.

But when suspicions begin to arise in the South about Welton’s credibility, the Pinkerton agency determines that it needs to make his story more convincing by providing him with a sister, and later with a wife. They draw from the mailroom girls to fill these roles.

When Hattie lands the coveted role of Welton’s spouse, she soon finds herself behind enemy lines, navigating more complications and compromises than she ever could have imagined, and very possibly more than she can handle.

The author might have invested more care in developing the tricky tension between Hattie’s and Thom’s working and personal relationships. Overall, however, this is an involving tale about Civil War intrigue, embroidered with rich historical detail. And if the ending of “The Courier’s Wife” seems rather inconclusive, readers can take comfort in knowing that this is only the first volume in a projected series, titled “Secrets of the Blue and Gray.”

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbaralmcm@gmail.com.