



Dawn's Early Light

Elswyth Thane , Leila Meacham (Foreword)

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Elswyth Thane is best known for her Williamsburg series, seven novels published between 1943 and 1957 that follow several generations of two families from the American Revolution to World War II. *Dawn's Early Light* is the first novel in the series.

In it, Colonial Williamsburg comes alive. Thane centers her novel around four major characters: the Aristocratic St. John Sprague, who becomes George Washington's aide; Regina Greensleeves, a Virginia beauty spoiled by a season in London; Julian Day, a young schoolmaster who arrives from England on the eve of the war and initially thinks of himself as a Tory; and Tibby Mawes, one of his less fortunate pupils, saddled with an alcoholic father and an indigent mother.

But we also see Washington, Jefferson, Lafayette, Greene, Patrick Henry, Francis Marion, and the rest of that brilliant galaxy playing their roles not as historical figures but as men. We see de Kalb's gallant death under a cavalry charge at Camden. We penetrate to the swamp-encircled camp which was Marion's stronghold on the Peedee. We watch the cat-and-mouse game between Cornwallis and Lafayette, which ended in Cornwallis's unlucky stand at Yorktown.

Dawn's Early Light is the human story behind our first war for liberty, and of the men and women loving and laughing through it to the dawn of a better world.

Dawn's Early Light Details

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Author : Elswyth Thane , Leila Meacham (Foreword)

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From Reader Review Dawn's Early Light for online ebook

Janga says

I grew up reading and rereading Thayne's Williamsburg series. I'm thrilled that the first two books are now available digitally. I hope the other books in the series will soon be added, and I would be happy to see *Tryst* and *Remember Today* available as well.

Jan says

This is my second time through the Williamsburg Saga. I love historical fiction, romances, and books set in locales that I am familiar with. This book satisfies all three. I enjoy hearing the politics of Revolutionary War America "first hand" and getting to know some of the prominent personalities a little better. (Ms. Thane, I hope you did your homework and didn't invent these things out of wholecloth!) I love Julian Day and Tibby and their story. I love this book.

Jackie says

This is historical fiction, based on the revolutionary war. Some romance, too! It was great!

Sarah says

It seems that many book bloggers are reading or talking about this book of late. I'd never heard of it prior to this summer.

Dawn's Early Light is the first in a series about a family and begins in Williamsburg just prior to the American Revolution. Yes, it is considered a romance, but I found it focuses heavily on historic details, events and people and the romance takes more of a backseat to the battles and the politics. It's been a long time since I've read a historical fiction that focused more on the historical than the fiction, but I mean that as a compliment.

Without spoiling too much I will add that there is one situation where a young girl falls in love with a man much older than her. I've read some reviews where readers have objected to this saying it's unrealistic, etc. etc. but knowing the time period and how marriage was then I didn't have any difficulty believing the story angle. In fact, it only seems disturbing through the eyes of a 21st century reader in a 21st century world.

All in all, I really enjoyed this book. Any reader who loves American history will likely find Dawn's Early Light an enjoyable read. Unfortunately the books are hard to find within library systems, but the first is available in pb and doesn't cost too much. I'm hoping they eventually turn up in kindle or are reprinted. I'd like to read some of the others in the series.

Becky says

First sentence: He stood remote and alone amid the cheerful bustle of the dock at Yorktown. Around his feet in their silver-buckled shoes was stacked enough luggage for two men. Behind him rose the proud, sharp prow and slender spars of the Mary Jones, which had brought him across the Atlantic from Southampton.

Premise/plot: Julian Day, one of our heroes, is a newly arrived Englishman. He's come to America, to Virginia, to be a school master. He becomes great friends with St. John Sprague. In fact he becomes almost one of the family--this in spite of the fact that he's on the 'wrong side' of the conflict or tensions. St. John is madly in love with Regina Greensleeves. Regina vows never to marry a man who'd fight against the King. This coming from the woman who'd flirt with any man within sight. (Think Scarlett O'Hara.) But St. John sees past the surface problems and is convinced he's the only man he'd be able to put her and keep her in place. (He may be right on that.) Julian, meanwhile, is blinded by two things: Regina's beauty AND Tibby's undying love for him. Who is Tibby? Well, she's a young girl, an abused and troubled girl, an impoverished girl who wants to be allowed to attend school with her twin brother. It's just not fair--she insists--that her brother gets an opportunity to go to school and she doesn't. After all, she's just as bright--if not more so--than her brother. After getting to know her better, Julian agrees. He becomes her greatest champion and supporter. It's no surprise that she loves, loves, loves, loves, LOVES him. But will he ever see her as a potential wife? It doesn't seem likely--at least not at first. But as the years go by, as the tensions turn into WAR, much changes.

My thoughts: I really loved this one. I love that it's a first in a series. I love that the series is a family saga that will span generations. I love that it's set in America. So often I'm drawn to books and series set in England, it is nice for me to be able to be swept away by American history. I love the historical aspects of it. I love that some of the characters interacted with real, historical people.

Lauralyn says

I know hardly anyone outside my own family who has read these books, but I love them. I think I learned more history from these than from any history class I have ever taken. As I learn more history, things tie in to what I've learned from these books so that I remember better. Some things are definitely dated, such as the anti-German sentiments, but that makes interesting history of its own since those views were popular at the time the books were written. I own the whole series and reread it every few years.

Hana says

Five stars for the history, two stars for the various 'romances'--for a weighted average of three and a half stars.

This would have been a much stronger book had Elswyth Thane chosen to simply tell the story of Julian Day, a young man who travels from London with his father who is taking up a post in Williamsburg,

Virginia in 1774. When his father dies during the voyage, Day is bewildered--left without money or friends or purpose in this strange new land. Julian's story, his character arc, the tale of his growing friendship with another transplanted Englishman, Saint-John Sprague, and Julian's changing feelings about the colonists' revolt are more than enough to engage the reader.

I love the way Julian feels the wilderness, the vast size of the land, almost as a weight pressing in upon him. The unvarnished images of life in this exotic world, as seen by Julian, are very well done. The Virginians take slavery for granted and Julian is shocked, surprised and sometimes led to rethink his ideas as some slaves seem happy and well treated, though, "...Sprague had said it was far otherwise with the wild Negroes."

In the early days the Revolution seemed an intellectual struggle and when it first breaks out the physical fighting is far away in Boston. But then war comes to the south and Julian is drawn in. This is by far the most powerful part of the book. Thane spares no details about the horrors of swamp warfare: "Sand filled his broken boots, sifted through his mended, worn-out stockings, and made agonizing grit between his toes. In his nostrils was the now familiar stench of hot, unwashed sickly men, and the sweating horses of the officers...Talk was forbidden, but still there were sounds--the sound of a retching man unable to suppress a groan and a curse; the sound of a man who tripped...and could not rise again and did not care." It gets worse and Thane lays bare not just the men's suffering, but also the abysmal failures of leadership in the early years of the war.

Well, I suppose I'll have to mention the romances....There are three women/girls in the story and all are mildly interesting, but not terribly well-developed as characters. Perhaps because I have just finished a deeply detailed reading of Elizabeth Gaskell's psychologically brilliant romantic history *North and South*, I found the women and the romances in Thane's book superficial, unconvincing and a distraction from the strong central character and his powerful experiences.

The final chapters in which (view spoiler) Tibby, who is described on the dust jacket as "the most appealing, irresistible creature Miss Thane has ever written about..." just never seemed fully real to me. (view spoiler)

I will definitely be reading more of Elswyth Thane, but I'll let the memories of Gaskell's *North and South* fade a little first :)

Bethany says

Oh dear. I did so want to like this more.

Ms. Thane - I can, without second thought, accept a girl falling in love with a ghost - that's wonderful and perfectly unobjectionable! But an eleven year old girl falling in honest-to-goodness-love with a 21 year old man, on the other hand... Please, no. Actually, I found every aspect of Tibby's personality and actions unbelievable.

I'm going to keep reading this series, though; I'm a sucker for a good family saga and maybe I'll like the next installment better.

Mallory says

Rating: 3.5 stars

Update: I had a few more difficulties with the story this time around. Namely, why did it not strike me the last time the underlying racism in this book? I am ashamed if I didn't notice it before. Thane portrays slaves as cheerful and happy, always acquiescent, looking only for their master's good. She has several of her characters state this view as their own early on. Perhaps my attitudes have changed in the five years since I first read it. However, I still delighted in Thane's descriptiveness and way with words. It struck me, especially in the first half of the book, how relevant the events then are to what's going on now. Political ideas were diverse and strong, yet people on opposite sides could still debate and be friends. There wasn't an animosity toward the "other side" like we see today; rather, a genuine willingness to understand and show respect. Julian is still an enjoyable character and I like seeing how his desire to simply blend in and avoid conflict slowly morphs into a desire to do something, anything to protect his adopted homeland.

Rating: 4 stars

The Revolutionary War is one of the most fascinating time periods in history for me. This novel brings Williamsburg to life during that turbulent time and peoples it with characters both real and imagined. We get to see this land through the eyes of Julian Day, an Englishman just off the ship who has come to teach school. He is immediately overwhelmed by the beauty and vitality of Virginia, a place he had supposed to still be backwoods wilderness. He is also astonished by the talk he hears against the king and the wishes expressed of a longing for self-government. But the longer Julian stays and the more friends he makes, he soon realizes that his heart and mind are changing. America has a hold on him and he must make a choice. The love story that drives the book is a tad unusual, but becomes endearing if for no other reason than Tibby's persistence. Overall, I really enjoyed this book and I intend to read the rest of Thane's Williamsburg novels.

Favorite quotes: "Of course it's big, man, it's America! It's so big we aren't quite sure where it ends!" - St. John Sprague

"It was a young world he had come to, and Williamsburg seemed a toy town where politics and war and even learning were solemn games played by charming children. And yet, he would remind himself, these self-confident, free-and-easy folk were the sons and daughters of men and women who had toiled and suffered amid deadly dangers to carve this perilous paradise out of the wilderness which lay even now at their threshold."

"Here was history in the making - and he realized with some astonishment that he himself had had a hand in its making... For months he had been caught up in the day-to-day intricacies of army life - perspective opened suddenly before him there on the field of surrender. This was a war, and they were winning it. This was a great day indeed."

Hannah says

This is a very well-written, heavily researched story of the American Revolutionary period in Williamsburg, VA. Thane's writing style transports you straight to the period and scenery, so much so that you feel and hear

and see and smell all the things in the scenes. Julian, Tibbie, St. John, Dorothea, Regina...etc, etc,...all seem to spring off the page.

Now, fair warning: there is a lot of profanity. I would have read this story much faster if they hadn't been so free with their curses. As it was, I did lay the book aside a number of times to get some space from the language. It won't bother everyone, but I don't believe it's okay for Christians to be using God's name lightly or in jest, so it bothered me plenty. Otherwise the content was clean.

Misfit says

Julian Day arrives in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1774. His father died on the voyage, but Julian soon makes friends including the Sprague family who take him under their wing. Julian finds himself torn between his loyalty to King George and his new friends who want freedom from the crown at all costs. Julian takes the vacant position of schoolmaster and the story focuses on his relationships with the Spragues as well as the two urchins he takes under his wing - Kit (Christopher) and Tibby (Tabitha).

As for the romantic attachments? Well, Tibby loves Julian. Julian thinks Tibby loves St. John. St. John loves Regina. Dorothea loves Julian. Julian loves Regina (so he thinks) and Regina loves no one but herself. Whew! Julian switches his loyalty to the Colonists and joins the rank and file, eventually working up in the ranks and serving under General Lafayette.

And that's about all I'm going to tell you, read it for yourself. Very interesting watching Julian's loyalties change, as well as his growing relationship with _____, and the interactions with many of the *players* of this period. Some of the battle scenes in the middle section were a bit tedious for me (although I was a bit tired at the time) and only for that am I dropping this to a four star rating. This is the first in a series and as I understand it this is the rest in order,

Yankee Stranger
Ever After
The Light Heart
Kissing Kin
This Was Tomorrow
Homing

Lisa says

I liked the characters and the story. I may have skimmed just a little during the descriptions of so many battles. I look forward to the next one.

OLT says

I read this book for the first time in the early 1960s or perhaps late 1950s and had my very own paperback copy (purchased for about 30 cents) that I read and reread as a kid. This is the first of Elswyth Thane's 7-

book Williamsburg series, which follows the Day and Sprague families from the time of the American Revolution up to WWII.

This one, about the American Revolution, was first published in 1943 but is not dated for modern readers except perhaps for the acceptance of and lack of indignation about slavery on the part of the colonist characters in the book. (That would be an unfortunate sign of the times when it was written and probably of when it took place.) Other than that, the historical elements about the colonists, the Constitutional Congress, Washington, Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Lafayette, battles with the British, etc. are unobjectionable and interesting and memory-tweaking of stuff we all learned in American history at school.

So the book serves as a refresher course on the American Revolution and at the same time offers us a story about life and love during that time, with a great cast of characters and sweet romances. Please don't be expecting anything sexy or prurient. It's a quality series of books that Thane wrote that can be read by young teens. My personal favorite as a young girl was Yankee Stranger, the second in the series, which takes place during the Civil War. I do hope the whole series will be available on Kindle. So far it's just these first two.

Tweety says

After two of my Goodreads friends read this and enjoyed it, I knew I had to read it soon, so I picked it up anticipating something wonderful. And it lived up to, and passed my expectations so much that I had to make sure I had at least the next two books at my disposal.

This is the story of two friends, especially Julian Day.

Julian Day who has recently arrived in America from England, finds all the plans he and his father had laid for their stay in America to be useless and now he hasn't a clue what to do all on his own. Thankfully, Julian makes the acquaintance of St. John Sprage, and they become fast friends even against the political unrest going on around them and the barrier that comes from them being of separate opinions on the verge of war.

St. John is a liberal through and through. Yet, he isn't the kind to turn a cold shoulder to those of a differing opinion, like Julian Day who feels both sides to be at fault and Regina Greensleeves, a spoilt, selfish, Williamsburg beauty who's Tory to the bone.

The least said the better, when it comes to the proud Regina, who delights in playing with people's feelings, particularly St. John through the blind Julian. St. John's sees exactly what she is, and loves her anyway. His sister, Dorothy is as sweet as she is nearsighted, and has an endearing way of tilting her head to see better. I love the side story the author gave her, for me it was completely satisfying.

Now for my favorite character, Tibby, who's only about ten when this story begins. I can't say much about her since she is wrapped up in so much of the plot, but that's she's worth reading about and that she's got her eyes wide open to things around her I can say. I can't remember the last time I read about a character I loved so much. I don't know what it is about her, but she really got to me. Some might find her story slightly unsatisfactory or just not their type, but if you like romance where it goes from friendship to love you should like it.

The war talk in the middle wasn't particularly interesting to me, but the rest of the book was so good this book

had to get five stars.

PG some swearing, a bit of violence and that's it if my memory serves me right.

Margaret says

This is the first in a series of seven historical novels called the Williamsburg Novels, which follow the families of the Days and the Spragues of Williamsburg, Virginia, through over 160 years, many generations, and several wars (from the American Revolution in *Dawn's Early Light* through the beginning years of World War II in *This Was Tomorrow* and *Homing*). I have read them so many times (starting when I was about seven years old) that I practically have them memorized, as have most of the other women in my family. Each book focuses on one or two main romances, with other strands of story weaving through them.

Thane has two remarkable gifts which keep the books compelling through every read. The first is the ability to portray the events, characters, and atmosphere of the historical periods she's writing about convincingly and memorably. Thane spent many years doing research in the United States and in England, and she's able to translate her research into a richly detailed historical background.

Against this background is set Thane's other gift: her characters. You might think that in a series of seven books about the same family, the characters would tend to blend into each other, but that's not the case; every one of them is an individual personality. The nicest effect of this is that as the books get closer together in time (Ever After through *Homing* only covers slightly over forty years), many characters feature throughout the books, and you get to see how their personalities and relationships develop over time and how the romances central to previous books worked out.

Rereading the Williamsburg books is like revisiting old, loved friends; I can remember meeting them for the first time, but it's even nicer to revisit them.

Julie Meek says

This is a 7 book historical series (The Williamsburg Series) that follows several families from pre-Civil War all the way through World Wars. Lots of interesting historical information regarding the US and Europe. There's romance, suspense, family drama, etc... If you like history at all, you'll probably like this series.

Kristina says

I found this book accidentally, when I searched "Williamsburg" in my hometown library's database, before making my first (of many) trips there. I didn't get a chance to read it before I went, but read it a couple of weeks after I had gotten back. There was definitely something to it, not reading the book before I went. I think I would have been disappointed had I not found Colonial Williamsburg the same charming, laid-back yet self-confident town that Elswyth Thane had so eloquently portrayed (that's not to say that it isn't, just that the focus on tourism takes some of the charm away).

Everything about the book is right - from the pace, to the tone, the descriptions of the scenery and the development of the characters. It's all about transformation: the colonies are in the midst of a rebellion that suddenly becomes violent; Julian Day has just lost his father and is a 'Loyalist' in Virginia; Tibby is experiencing love and loss during her teenage years. There is something uniquely disarming and thoroughly captivating about being an observer in the personal romantic turmoils that occur alongside of and juxtapose the shifts in political affiliations, both individual and societal. The balance of romance, history and war is unmatched in any other historical fiction I have read, as is the amount and depth of the meticulous detail that has been carefully weaved into the story to provide as authentic a feel as possible.

Emily says

I loved this book. I picked it up at a library sale not knowing the author. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I was pleasantly surprised. It was a fascinating look into the Revolutionary War era.

The story centers around a newly arrived young man, Julian Day, from England, suddenly left on his own by the death of his father on the journey overseas. He is immediately taken in with all kindness by St. John Sprague and his aunt who become a second family to him. The whole community is welcoming and supportive of him even though he was left alone and nearly penniless. We journey with them through the years spanning the war.

I felt like I had been there with them, walking through all the trials and struggles of wartime in the colonies. The war scenes were clearly displayed in their harshness without being morbid or going into too much stark, terrible detail. I thoroughly enjoy books that make you feel like you were there, that cause you to view the characters as personal friends, and that make history come alive so you leave with a new appreciation of times long ago. This one does all three. I'm looking forward to finding more books by this author!

Jeanette says

It's good- but for me held several flaws. A couple of the romance aspects were difficult to obscure in order to approach a process to embed, enjoy and understand the dynamics of Julian's changing loyalties. And the founders included, those historic figures, they came alive to a 4 star quality of appearance, attitude and role for each. And those in a changing mode, at times, as well. But despite that the copy length readings for the children and especially Tibby? So far fetched to have an 11 year old have those captured feelings in the way that was repeatedly demonstrated. I guess it is possible, but with all the other issues of the real life positions, jobs, duties for meeting and ascription etc. going on here? It doesn't seem to "fit".

This was much better for me in the war and battles sense, than it was for all the unrequited love aspects. They normally never float my boat at all. At least here they were association understandable.
But Regina?

I really liked the slowness and depth at points which really put you into the intimate face and pace of Virginia as it existed just then. Fury and then lots of waiting. And not just for soldiers, although people in any army probably understand that kind of momentum.

It's a good illustration of the questions and lengths to purpose most citizens of these colonies would have at this particular time. How much dominance and taxing for next to nothing in return would they abide. Or

what levels would be tolerable.

But it was extremely well constructed to convey that the American Revolution, unlike the French one, did not come out of intense anger and need for revenge/retributions or any frothing of mob violence, but from an independent course of thoughts and much more disciplined offense. Many of the prime concerns of these men and their dithers for government quite different and not all coordinating with each other. But most of the onus centered (for almost all of them) on the position of the individual citizen, merchant, or whatever in his place that was far from the onerous dictates of a faraway and to them corrupt and complicated system. One that still was most connected by liege loyalties and class separations of widest divide. And quite apart from the system of "everyman" that was starting to settle in so many New World towns and cities.

It would have been a better book if it was completely Julian's conscience and thoughts dominated throughout. Not for some, but for me. I like historical fiction mostly straight up. Less romance and more power motive. More like Hilary Mantel.

Gaile says

This is what I call an easy reader. A slim volume with only 244 pages, it was a breeze to read! It is also chuck full of history! In the background of the stirrings of the American Revolution, Julian Day arrives from England. His father had applied for a teaching position in Williamsburg, Virginia but died on the voyage. To his surprise, Julian is given a splendid welcome, offered the position meant for his father and decides to stay a while.

He meets several women, the Mawes twins, one of whom is called Tibby, A Virginian beauty, Regina and his host's sister, Dorothea. His host, St. John means to marry Regina but smitten by her beauty, Julian is confused for a long time. He helps the child, Tibby Mawes in her quest for an education. As the war escalates and his class empties out for lack of pupils, he realizes he has become a rebel and eventually becomes an aide to General Lafayette. Then one day it dawns on him that Tibby has become a woman. This book is stuffed with many historical figures and famous battles ending with the stand-off at Yorktown all against a background of a tender romance.
