



## **Johnny One-Eye: A Tale of the American Revolution**

*Jerome Charyn*

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*Johnny One-Eye* is bringing about the rediscovery of one of the most "singular and remarkable [careers] in American literature" (Jonathan Yardley, *Washington Post Book World*). In this picaresque tour de force that reanimates Revolutionary Manhattan through the story of double agent John Stocking, the bastard son of a whorehouse madam and possibly George Washington, Jerome Charyn has given us one of the most memorable historical novels in years. As Johnny seeks to unlock the mystery of his birth and grapples with his allegiances, he falls in love with Clara, a gorgeous, green-eyed octoroon, the most coveted harlot of Gertrude's house. The wild parade of characters he encounters includes Benedict Arnold, the Howe brothers, "Sir Billy" and "Black Dick," and a manipulative Alexander Hamilton. Not since John Barth's *The Sotweed Factor* and Gore Vidal's *Burr* has a novel so dramatically re-created America's historical beginnings. Reading group guide included.

## **Johnny One-Eye: A Tale of the American Revolution Details**

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Author : Jerome Charyn

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## From Reader Review Johnny One-Eye: A Tale of the American Revolution for online ebook

### Nancy says

I can't think of the last book I disliked so much that I actually bothered to finish. This one took me 8 or 9 months to get through because I kept putting it down and reading other books. For a while, I kept hoping it would get better. But it never did. When I picked it up I thought, "Oh, historical fiction set during the American Revolution - this could be good." Could be, but wasn't. The short chapters seemed too choppy, so I never felt drawn into the story. I hated the main character. There wasn't enough connection with the supporting characters for me to care much about them. While writing in the language style of the time was probably historically accurate, it threw me because my little brain had to work harder to hear the language in my head. Even though the plot followed a linear path, it felt completely disjointed. Let's see...what else didn't I like? Everything. The only reason I finished was because it became a point of pride somewhere along the way (and my kids kept asking when I was going to finish it). I can see some people giving it a higher rating and I wish I could come up with some objective remarks that would lead people who might like it in the right direction. Like, "if you like books with unlikeable characters, this might be for you..."

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### Jonathanrwilson says

Seriously one of the best books I've read. I had never heard of this guy before I picked this up, and I've never seen anything else by him in the bookstore. But if you like historical fiction, please read this. Highly entertaining.

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### Jonathan Gruber says

really interesting time period and characters but the writing style gets in the way and the bawdiness is simply too unrealistic to be interesting.

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### Beverly McClure says

War turns lives and countries upside down. And if you're playing both sides, you'll likely spend a lot of time in cellars or prison or the hold of a ship. You might even be tarred and feathered. Just ask Johnny One-Eye.

In **JOHNNY ONE-EYE, A TALE OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**, author Jerome Charyn follows the eight years of the American Revolution in New York. Johnny Stocking, AKA Johnny One-Eye because he lost an eye in Canada with Benedict Arnold, age 17 at the beginning, is a fictional character placed in the midst of real events and participants in the war. Johnny, an orphan, suspects that Gertrude, the mistress of The Holy Ground, a brothel, and George Washington, commander in chief of the Continental Army, are his parents. So many different characters were involved in the story that parts of the book confused me and I had

to refer to the list of characters at the front to see who was who. The listings were a great help.

One of my favorite parts to the novel is the vivid picture the author paints of what George Washington was like, from his physical appearance to his concern for his men and for Gert, as well as his feelings for Johnny. We see Washington, I think, as human, and not simply the great general we read about in most historical books. As for Johnny, his fears, his emotions, and what he goes through to survive show a gruesome side to the war. To me, he's a brave young man that sometimes makes bad decisions and has to pay the consequences, much like teens of today.

The American Revolution is one of my favorite periods in history. I've read many books about the war, but none quite like this one. We see a different side to the war, rather than just the battles between two armies. The characters, both real and from the author's imagination, bring the Revolution to life, with true events and imaginary ones. The language and some of the scenes are too rough for my liking and I skimmed over them. Other readers may not be offended by the openness of what goes on at The Holy Ground, but I'm not crazy about it. If you love the Revolutionary time period of our nation, you might find this novel enjoyable. I think it does show the effect war has on not only the soldiers but their wives, children, and friends. War is ugly.

But the character I enjoyed the most was the fictional Johnny One-Eye. I'm always for the underdog. I like to see someone whose life is about as bad as it can get fight back for his beliefs. Even though he may not always win, at least he tries.

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### **Ruth says**

If you like the history of the Revolutionary War in the U.S. then this is the book for you. It is well researched. The hero, Johnny, bounces among War greats such as Benedict Arnold, George Washington, and Alexander Hamilton to name a few. Despite the fact that the author jumps around a great deal, he still tells an impelling story. His description of being tarred and feathered makes your skin crawl.

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### **Lenore Webb says**

"Johnny One-Eye" by Jerome Charyn. Yes that is the same Jerome who wrote about Emily Dickenson and Babe Ruth. This time we are visiting the American Revolution through a interesting tale of intrigue and spics that are not quite spies. Oh and let's not forget the ever present 'nunnery' aka the local whore house where everyone gathers. Hey, you have to be able to entertain the troops some how. Actually, I am enjoying this story even if it is a lil on the far fetched side for me. Not sure life would happen this way but if your wanting to have all the interesting ins and outs of the 1700's then here it is. The cast of characters from the great George Washington to Benedict Arnold on to the British Howe brothers officers and free slaves twirled around a cast of very strong women roles, not a bad combination. I am in the last third of the book and hope to finish it on my plane ride today. Really wondering where it will end up as the main character Johnny has experienced the highs and lows of war time. From losing his eye in a battle where he was the scribe to Benedict Arnold to currently being on a British prison ship. He has served as a double agent for both sides, swooned over a whore he will never have, narrowly escaped death yet survived being tarred and feathered to even being at some of the most interesting private meetings of the time.

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### **HBalikov says**

Hoping this is as good as Sot-Weed Factor

I have enjoyed this as much as Barth's book. It has a picaresque approach to our Revolutionary War. Charyn has obviously done a good deal of research on NYC during this period and it is often hard to tell where the history leaves off and the imagination begins. Like The Sot-Weed Factor it has a bawdy nature and the plot is full of plots, misunderstandings and two-dimensional characters from history that are now fleshed out. Did you know that GW had a two-decade clandestine affair while he was becoming The Father of our Country? Did you know that the Howe brothers often quarreled about women and tactics (and which one was obsessive about vingt-et-un)? Were you aware that Rhode Island had a troop of exclusively black soldiers fighting for freedom or Major Andre enjoyed creating dramas as much as he did being a British spymaster. I didn't and I don't care how much is true. This war lasted from 1776 into the 1780s and Charyn provides an excellent sense of how it affected day-to-day life - from the difficulties in clothing and feeding the American troops to the exhaustion of firewood during the winter. There is plenty more including the Nuns of Robinson street whose bordello was a key to General Washington surviving the British plots to capture him. All is seen through the remaining eye of John Stocking, about twenty, who plays both sides, as necessary, to survive.

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### **Steve Lozon says**

This book is like a poor man's 'Known World'. Historical fiction that humanizes an impersonal historical times. I am fascinated with non-fiction that covers the Revolution and the founding of the nation. It is easy to forget that nothing is destiny, and that choices made by Washington, Hamilton, et al, could have drastically changed the course of history and our lives as we know them. This book creates vivid emotional lives for key characters of that era, and illustrates what should be obvious, but is easy to forget - they were imperfect humans living through brutal times, with a lot at stake. My favorite part was a brief depiction of the famous scene where Washington wins back his nearly mutinous troops by faltering while addressing his army. Charyn draws a perfect picture of how that might have touched the soldiers.

Overall, the title character was basically a cipher. His main function was to appear in crucial situations and draw out dialog to illustrate key players thought process. It made for an entertaining read, but verged on preposterous at times.

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### **Michelle (True Book Addict) Miller says**

John Stocking, aka Johnny One-Eye is an enigmatic character. Is he a loyalist or a rebel? Is he for the British or for America? Is he George Washington's son or not? None of these questions really get answered, but that's not really a problem in this novel. Charyn succeeds in bringing across the precarious nature of America during the Revolutionary War. The ins and outs of British occupied Manhattan are quite confusing. I found myself scratching my head several times wondering who was on whose side. We are introduced to famous characters such as George Washington, Benedict Arnold, and Alexander Hamilton and we are exposed to their characters and personalities from the point of view of Johnny One-Eye. Does his one eye give him a skewed view of the world? Sometimes it would seem so. Was George Washington hopelessly in love with a woman who would become a madam? Possibly true. Did Benedict Arnold turn traitor because his beautiful

wife was intelligent and a British spy? That would seem true as well. All of these intrigues are portrayed nicely in the book and although they may not be altogether factual, one can't help but believe in their plausibility. I will warn you, this may not be a book to read if you have no interest in history. As a history buff myself, I found the book to be a refreshing look at the Revolutionary War.

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## L.A. says

Article first published as Book Review:Johnny One-Eye by Jerome Charyn on Blogcritics.

In the early years of America, a ragged group of volunteers, led by George Washington, dealt with the American Revolution and fighting for freedom. Many of them began as farmers, and yet become a part of history and recorded as heroes. Many of these men became the forefathers of our nation and are the very reason and beginning of our independence.

In Johnny One-Eye, Jerome Charyn has used history and rumors of the time, to build a story of heroes, a tale of love and revenge, and of the difficulties and possibilities of the revolution. He has used actual events and characters in history and peopled it with imaginary characters and events of his own.

Drawing from dark times of revolution, Charyn has given us a novel set during the eight years of the revolution, a gritty and difficult time. He uses Johnny as a character and narrator, which ads a different and unique take on the times. Johnny is a young man raised in a whorehouse and a double agent as many were during those times. He first comes to our attention when caught trying to poison Washington's soup. Johnny is relatively educated and often works as a scribe, and it is during one of these missions, scribing for Benedict Arnold that he loses his eye.

Johnny seems to lead a charmed life, getting in and out of danger while balancing his confusion and concerns about the war. He loves his king, and yet now that he knows him and understands him a bit better, he is drawn to George Washington. There are also the rumors that he may be the illegitimate son of George Washington, a rumor that seems to keep him alive. Both sides have a bit of a soft spot for him, and yet there are those too that want him dead. He is in love what Clara an octoroon whore whom he grew up with and it is obvious to all in the know that the Madame is his mother. This all plays a part in this story and his mother is set as the other woman in Washington's life.

Through the difficulties and avenues traveled by Johnny, we learn of many of the characters of the time of the revolution, notables such as Hamilton, Arnold, General Clinton, King George III and Washington himself. Set mainly in Manhattan and surrounding areas we read of the skirmishes and problems encountered by Washington and his crew. We learn about the courageous African stevedores and slaves that lay their lives on the line to help make this a new country free from England's control. Full of both darkness and lightness, it is also full of real history and information as well as riddled with fiction.

Charyn has taken us to a time in history, when America was just becoming a new nation. His descriptions of the times and events both real and imagined, take you inside of the pain and anguish of the characters involved. You feel as though you are there, the descriptions of the winter scenes with Washington and his men such when they left bloodied trails because of lack of money for warmer clothing and shoes, left a lasting impression on me. While I read much of this same information during history classes in school, it was dryer and less real. Charyn makes it real, you can feel their pain and also feel their love and adoration of their

leader. It is what keeps them fighting in the harshest and worst of conditions.

Johnny One-Eye is an engaging character that creates more of a story, and gives us an opportunity to see the unfolding of our history from a different and unique perspective. His involvement with both the women of the whorehouse as well as his own bits of intrigue keep it interesting, giving us both a more in-depth look at reality, and offering us a different perspective of events.

Jerome Charyn brings us wonderful fictional characters and weaves them into actual events in history, setting encounters with actual historical figures, which creates an interesting fictional history that reads like reality. Often truth is stranger than fiction, and while the added characters come from imagination, the truth of the times only adds a darker more sinister cast. The character of Johnny adds a bit of humor to a story that could be quite daunting.

If you love historical fiction, you will enjoy Johnny One-Eye. It is riddled with the actual events in history and is a different and more mercurial look at history. It is a view as evidenced by a young man, in the middle of a time of turmoil. This would be a great book for a reading group or book club.

This book was received as a free copy from Tribute Books. All opinions are my own based off my reading and understanding of the material.

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## **Gravity says**

I've read a few other Jerome Charyn books thanks to learning about him from an old issue of the Review of Contemporary Fiction that I picked up at the ginormous Friend's of the Library sale years ago. Charyn's a flat-float, twangy, picaresque humorist writing usually about the assorted zaniness of zany people living in New York in the later part of the 20th century.

Johnny One-Eyed, like the rest I've read from Charyn (limited, he's prolific), is a love story of New York. But old, old New York. Set during the Revolutionary War, a young character named Johnny One-Eye, (lost his eye while serving with B. Arnold) and who is ostensibly the bastard son of George Washington and the Mother Superior of the Nunnery, has many a dangerous and wacky adventure as he shuffles his loyalties between the Tories and the Patriots, doubling and tripling his agency so many times until no one is sure to whom his loyalties lie, most especially himself.

Johnny spends his days hiding in the closets of the *nuns* (read: sex-workers, playing with the silken slippers of his great love Clara, an tall octogenarian who does her fair share of spying and playing the double/triple agent as well. Until he is sent off to perform as secretary to General Arnold, he studies all the great generals, from Howe to Washington, as the men ignore their conflicts long enough to play endless rounds of "viegt et un" at the nunnery.

Johnny One-Eyed is a great bawdy romp through an imagined history. If you recently watched the John Adams mini-series, this is a fun peek around another corner. New England may have been tightly wound, but in Charyn's imaginative colonial New York it certainly was not.

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## **Ted says**

The last novel I read about the Revolutionary War was Johnny Tremain (more recently, visits to Saratoga battlefield and hearing about Benedict Arnold's exploits, Ron Chernow's excellent Hamilton biography, and HBO's John Adams have fleshed out my imagination of the period). Jerome Charyn writes about a young Johnny, too - a few years older, I believe, at 17 in 1775 - but he moves the action from Boston to his home city of New York, to the side of George Washington as he flits around Manhattan, soon occupied the Brits, keeping his thin armed resistance alive among intrigue. Oh, and Johnny One-Eye (he lost it with brave Arnold in Quebec in a brief bit of service) might be Washington's bastard with Manhattan's premiere whorehouse madame. The word nunnery is used instead, the girls are "nuns." Scandalous? It shouldn't be. Charyn takes a few bits of historic evidence to try to flesh out the character of the quiet warrior and a wily man devoted to his country, not his rich widow wife, with a strange wartime family. It's a lot like what Kazantzakis did with Jesus in the Last Temptation of Christ. Washington is a great man, but Charyn makes him human, whereas history has not portrayed him as well as accurately as it has Jefferson, Hamilton, Adams, Burr and others whose pens told us a little more about them (and who left sex scandals, vicious politics, and duels in their wakes).

Johnny grows up among the nuns and loves the star of the nunnery, the beautiful blonde octaroon Clara, who like Johnny takes to spying, a bit more successfully than our main protagonist. Johnny likes King George just fine, but he loves his mother and soon General Washington, he loves Benedict Arnold too, a bond that transcends the treason. He's personally loyal. He makes his enemies too, and is whipped around by fates and plots in picaresque adventures, a Jack Sparrow-esque pirate boy in the middle of the American Revolution, a character out of a Decemberists song. Decemberists fans, read this book. Johnny One-Eye fans, pick up Picaresque if you don't have it already.

The book should be treasured for its imagination and description, bringing the New York of 230 years ago to life, including the black denizens and soldiers often left out of history books as well as fiction, and for making George Washington a man not a saint.

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## **Jason says**

I am a big fan of historical fiction and this is one of the best I have read. Having said that, it was quite different from the other types of historical fiction I have read. Where to begin. . . .

Johnny One-Eye (JOE) is billed as a comedy set during the Revolutionary War. It is, to be sure a comedy, but certainly not in the same vein as something as laugh-out-loud ridiculous as the Flashman series, courtesy of George Fraser. JOE is a dark comedy, with some giggle out loud moments, but it is more Junoesque in its comedic sensibilities than it is McLovin'. In other words, it does have its moments of both dry literary humor and silly, slapstick humor.

Most of the historical fiction I have read has been event-based. The author has chosen an historical event, or series of historical events, and plunked down a character amidst these events. The narrative is driven by these events (be it Jeff Sahara's trek through the south in his Gods and Generals series (based during the American Civil War) or E.L. Doctorow's, The March (also the American Civil War). In some cases, the character may even be the catalyst of said events as Sir Harry Flashman sometimes found himself in the amazing George Fraser series, which traipses around the world from (India, Afghanistan, Borneo, Turkey, China, Africa, and the U.S., amongst many other historical hotspots) where the reader finds poor Flashy fighting (or rather running away from) action in the Crimean, Opium and American Civil Wars. In either of these cases, the

events themselves are the main characters and the fictionalized players are simply that, players atop a stage swept along by the events that swirl around them.

In the refreshing case of Johnny One-Eye, Jerome Charyn, lets the characters take center stage -- both real and imagined. The events, be it the occupation of New York, the battles for the City, the Jersey prison barge, etc. are real enough and based in historical fact, but Charyn never lets the Revolution take over completely. The War is the catalyst for the growth of his characters and it is a main focus of the novel, but it does not overtake the novel completely. Charyn allows JOE and those around him to grow, adapt, fight against, and sometimes wilt as a result of the War for Independence, but he does not let the War wash over New York and its characters like a tidal wave washing over a boardwalk.

In many fictional histories, a larger-than-life character is sprung on the reader, (again I point to Fraser's poor, misunderstood Flashy), while the real men and women of history are but cardboard cutouts, around which the main character dances. (Think the literary parallel to Tom Hanks' Forrest Gump Photoshopped in next to Kennedy, Nixon or in front of the Little Rock 9). I sometimes wonder if the author has forgotten his/her novel is being billed as fictitious and is too afraid to attach feelings to these non-fictional characters for fear of misrepresenting them. As big a fan as I am of Sir Harry and his roguishness, he is a caricature to be sure and there was no other non-fictional character in Fraser's novels that could compete. Charyn succeeds where perhaps Fraser does not, as Charyn delves as deeply into JOE's soul as he does the psyche of George Washington, known for his bouts of melancholy and depression. Charyn provides a refreshing look at Benedict Arnold and his social climbing wife and does not simply paint this man as the one-sided national traitor that we learned him to be as grade-schoolers.

Moreover, Charyn keeps us in one spot for the duration of the Revolutionary War -- New York City. We do not jump from Concord to Ticonderoga to Valley Forge to Bunker Hill and back again. This enables Charyn to focus on those that history forgets -- the occupied. The people who are neither patriots nor traitors, but simply survivors attempting to make it through to the end of a war alive. Charyn gives us a glimpse at those people who cannot afford to take sides, blacks, the poor, women, the old and infirm, as well as the too young.

A fascinating novel, a humorous and dark piece, perhaps more fiction than fact, but I loved it and I expect anyone who appreciates historical fiction will certainly enjoy this one as well.

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### **Jessica says**

Wow, I'm a little surprised at all the negative reviews here! I guess it's not for everyone, but I found Johnny One Eye so funny and so clever - it was a blast to read. It explores the psychology of history, which is fascinating to me. Much of the story is fictional, of course, but from what I understand, quite a few details are accurate. I found it by chance in the New Books section at my library - I had never even heard of Jerome Charyn. I now plan to read everything he's every written!

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### **Sarah Michele says**

I've been letting the kiddo pick my books again. This time she did a good job – I was looking for some Michael Chabon but instead she pulled Johnny One-Eye off the shelf.

Johnny One-Eye tells the story of the American Revolution in Manhattan through the eye of the eponymous main character, who may or may not be the bastard son of George Washington. Manhattan fo the time is a city of spies, including Johnny, the “nuns” of Robinson Street (where he was raised until a benefactor got him admitted to King’s College). In the beginning of the novel Johnny plays both sides, really just looking out for his own best interests but as the war goes on he does take a side. He runs into any number of important historical figures – George Washington, of course, Benedict Arnold, pretty much all of the British commanders, as well as any number of people who may or may not have actually existed.

It's a thoroughly enjoyable story, based in the broad stream of events of the Revolutionary War but the details are filled in from Charyn's imagination. It's completely plausible, though, which is a lot of what makes it so entertaining.

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