

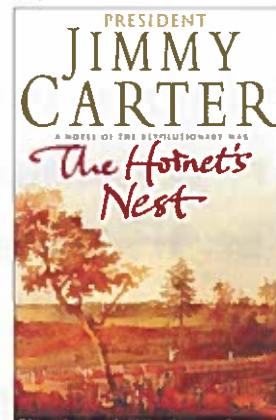
**I**t seems a lifetime ago since that bitterly cold Washington day, in January 1981, when Jimmy Carter left the Oval Office for the last time as President, and Ronald Reagan promised to uphold the US constitution. Minutes later, the 52 American hostages whose 444-day ordeal had sealed Carter's fate took off from Tehran. Carter left the capital for Georgia and, for a time, the world turned its back on the first Southerner to be elected President since the Civil War. Then, in 2002, the Nobel Peace Prize formally acknowledged what anyone who'd kept a weather eye on Carter already knew: that he was America's most distinguished former president, a man who'd sought to enrich the lives of others, rather than enrich himself.

America has come to respect and admire this polymath who travels the world, often with his wife, Rosalynn, monitoring elections, promoting economic and social reform, peaceful conflict resolution and much besides, under the auspices of the Carter Center, in Plains, Georgia. The couple also spend a week or so a year engaged in hands-on house-building with Habitat for Humanity. In between all that, Carter – who turns 80 on 1 October – writes, paints, makes furniture and teaches Sunday school. Unlike almost every other ex-president, he is resolutely *not* on the lecture circuit.

American, British and (as they were then called) Indian eyes. "There was no geographical boundary among those who fought. It was within a family. In some of the major battles, every one of the soldiers who fought on the American side were British settlers." The war would not have been won were it not for an alliance with the French – "over half the troops fighting against Cornwallis [the British general who was later accused of "losing America"] were French, and even then we wouldn't have won if the French Navy hadn't come in," Carter explains, acknowledging the irony of the Franco-American alliance in light of the two countries' recent falling out.

It's an ambitious first novel, even for as able a man as Carter, but like all truly bright and able people, he's not ashamed of admitting what he doesn't know. So, before starting work, he talked to professors of creative writing at Emory University in Georgia, where he himself is a Distinguished Professor, and "adopted the status of a student. I learned how to do character, dialogue, plot... to weave real characters with fictional ones... I outlined what happened during the Revolutionary War and I read around fifty books to make sure I understood its complexities. I read biographies of privates and generals, often very biased historical attempts... Extracting from all that what *actually* happened

"In a life dedicated to hard work and high ambitions there should be time for enjoyment"



# Renaissance man

**Liz Thomson** talks to **Jimmy Carter** – arguably America's best former president – who, at 80, publishes his first novel

"Writing has been my major source of income since I left the White House," he explains. "I've really enjoyed it, and it's been a panoply of different kinds of books. My first was in 1975, *Why Not the Best?*, which was sort of a campaign book. That's now sold over a million copies, but I didn't start writing seriously until I left the White House." His latest endeavour is a novel, *The Hornet's Nest*, set amid the War of Independence, America's bloodiest conflict and one that has inspired far fewer novels and films than the Civil War. A bestseller in the States, it took Carter seven years to research and write, in part because of all his other activities but also because he was working on two other books, *An Hour Before Daylight* and *Christmas in Plains*.

"I wanted it to be accurate and to provide a balanced description of what happened," he explains, in curiously familiar soft southern tones. "All the histories and the novels are biased towards the skirmish that took place in the North. But the major battles which determined the outcome of the war took place in the South... It's a complicated, messy war, and all that many people know about it is that Paul Revere rode a horse in the middle of the night and George Washington crossed the river in a snowstorm. We glorify some of our heroes – Washington deserves to be glorified – but the painful aspect of the war is ignored and the facts of it have been inadvertently or deliberately distorted."

At the heart of *The Hornet's Nest*, a rich, detailed, often complex but always rewarding novel, is the story of Ethan Pratt, a shoemaker's son with pacifist tendencies, who, in 1766, moves from Philadelphia to North Carolina. He yearns for a quiet life but finds himself drawn into the Revolution as a Georgia militiaman. The moral ambiguity of the conflict is clear, and the unfolding horror of the war is seen through

was my first challenge. Then I had to create the characters and make more vivid in the reader's mind what *did* happen... All these citizens who swore loyalty to the king one by one took up weapons against the king... I wrote one-page biographies of each of them so I wouldn't forget." Once he started writing, Carter discovered what all new novelists discover: that the characters take over. He chuckles. "I never dreamed Ethan would betray his wife and I've no idea which woman he'll eventually go with."

*The Hornet's Nest* has already been an American success story, and Carter admits to having begun "preliminary work" on a sequel, but he's also "contemplating" a book on woodworking. First, though, there's more non-fiction, *Sharing the Good Times*, "about how even in a life dedicated to hard work and high ambitions there should be time for enjoyment. When I was a young person, I was driven by ambition to succeed, to the detriment of my own pleasure. You're most likely to succeed if you combine hard work and dedication with pleasure." To that end, the entire Carter family, including 11 grandchildren, take an annual holiday in "an intriguing place".

One thing that's *not* on the cards is a return to party politics, though he did address the Democratic Convention and doesn't mince words when talking about the current occupant of the White House. "This administration has abandoned the principles of American foreign policy. Hope has been dissipated. I taught a Bible lesson yesterday on faith, and I have faith that things will improve." And will he be monitoring the election in Florida come November? The 39th President chuckles heartily.

*The Hornet's Nest* is published by Simon & Schuster on 4 October, price £17.99

Jimmy Carter: writing different kinds of books

