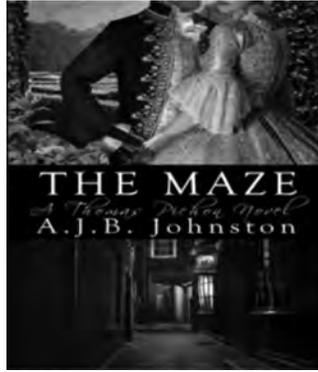


Trevor Sawler

*The Maze: A Thomas Pichon Novel*

by A. J. B. Johnston.

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My relationship with historical fiction is uneasy at best. For whatever reason, I have always equated historical novels with the so-called “bodice-ripper.” You know the sort of book I mean—it has a lurid cover, with an overly-muscled, long haired man who invariably has his shirt open, revealing the kind of six-pack abs that exist only in books like this and Hollywood’s latest romantic comedies. The bodice-ripper is the stuff of suburbia, of lonely housewives, of quiet desperation and unlikely romance. The plots are contrived, the characters two dimensional, and the endings both stereotypical and painfully saccharine. I want no part of them, and would rather open a phone book to a random page and start reading than be forced to endure a single chapter of such a book.

Perhaps it is this (admittedly biased and perhaps unfair) attitude that made me put off reading A. J. B. Johnston’s latest book for as long as I did. Certainly my reluctance to begin reading made little sense; after all, I had already read the first book in this series—*Thomas: A Secret Life*—and found it immensely enjoyable. Yet the memory of too many hours spent in too many airports where I finally succumbed to boredom and picked up a random, overpriced book only to find myself besieged by clichéd beautiful women and clichéd manly men engaged in ludicrous (and all too often salacious) storylines was a strong one. When I

finally did begin *The Maze*, it was with what can best be described as uneasiness. Intellectually, I fully expected this to be a fine book; emotionally, however, I was once again in an uncomfortable plastic chair in Pearson, or O'Hare, or Logan (all airports look the same after about four hours of waiting) about to be faced with stock characters, badly written sex scenes, and utterly pointless plots.

I should not have waited as long as I did.

A. J. B. Johnston is best known as an historian, but I expect that this will change as he continues working on his Thomas Pichon novels. *The Maze* is the second in this series, and it is a fine book. Johnston continues developing the story of Pichon, the French colonial official who betrayed his French masters by spying for the British, and was in many ways responsible for the 1755 fall of Fort Beausejour. In the historical record, Pichon is portrayed as something of an unsavoury figure: he is a seducer of young women, an unrepentant spendthrift, and a man who failed to live up to his rather spectacular potential.

Fortunately, at no point does the (rather accomplished and highly regarded) academic side of Johnston take over and reduce the story to a scholarly consideration of an historical person; instead, Pichon is as real and developed a character as you will find anywhere. In the first novel in this series, we are introduced to Pichon as a child growing up in Vire, Normandy, and on the streets of Paris. Initially Pichon is presented as a sensitive boy who loves poetry, who is immersed in theology and religion, and who has a deep and abiding appreciation for the arts; before long, however, he turns his back on all of this and enters the world of aspiring writers, street prostitutes, and street philosophers, and he does so with an enthusiasm that is both startling and a little awe inspiring.

In *The Maze*, Pichon the adolescent becomes Pichon the man, and the transformation is both believable and impressive. Much of the novel focuses on a six-year span when Pichon is in London during the 1730s. His behaviour in London is not what one might expect from a child raised in polite society, but it is highly entertaining. Perhaps the best way to describe it is to suggest that the historical account of Thomas Pichon as an unsavoury character is not entirely without merit. Before leaving

France for London, he marries a woman named Marguerite, but continues his illicit affair with a woman named Helene. After being caught, Pichon and Helene flee to London, where he tries his hand at writing, but the allure of the sordid English underworld proves too strong, and before long he is once again living the life of the libertine. While on one level this descent into debauchery is painful to watch, on another it has a kind of fascinating appeal. Pichon is so unashamedly enthusiastic in his vice-ridden life that the reader can't help but have some measure of admiration for it.

One aspect of this novel that I found most impressive was Johnston's handling of the (not infrequent) scenes where characters become, shall we say, excessively friendly. Whereas in the bodice-ripper sex scenes often border on the ridiculous, in *The Maze* Johnston understands that this sort of thing is far more effective when the lurid details are left to the reader's imagination. His handling of the more physical aspects of romance is both tasteful and effective.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable novel, and is well worth the read. Johnston has managed to improve the quality of the historical fiction genre by quite a margin—so much so that when I next find myself on a trip with a number of pre-scheduled hours of boredom on the itinerary, I intend to take a few copies of his books with me and leave them scattered around the departure gates, sparing some other bored travellers the pain of enduring overpriced bodice-rippers. Surely it's the least I can do.