

Book Review: The Frozen River  
By Ariel Lawhon

Not every work of historical fiction is created equal. What separates them has little to do with the original story or event, and more to do with the literary skills of the author. In that regard, Ariel Lawhon has solidified herself as one of the leading writers of first-rate historical fiction. And her latest, “The Frozen River,” is no exception.

The story is based on the experiences of Martha Ballard, a midwife and healer in Hallowell, Maine from 1785 to 1812. Her extensive diary containing thousands of entries over the course of nearly three decades was handed down from generation to generation, eventually finding its way to the Maine State Library. And it's the recorded entries from 1789 and 1790 that comprise the heart of “The Frozen River.”

In November 1789, just as the Kennebec River has begun to freeze, a body is found just beneath a thin layer of ice. The body is that of Joshua Burgess, one of two men recently accused of raping Rebecca Foster, an act that Ballard has documented in her diary based on details shared by Foster. Called in to examine the body, Ballard determines Burgess was murdered.

But when a local physician contradicts her conclusion, Ballard is compelled not only to investigate the circumstances surrounding Burgess's death, she also becomes a key witness in the trial of Judge Joseph North, the other man accused of raping Foster. And in her quest for the truth, she uncovers a land-grab scheme that could leave half of Hallowell's residents homeless.

Lawhon uses Ballard's diary entries to detail the struggles and tragedies of the families whose children she helped bring into the world. Those entries also help illustrate

Ballard's family life, including her loving relationship with husband Ephraim. Together they had nine children, though three died during a diphtheria epidemic in 1769.

Ballard, research shows, was in many ways an herbalist. She harvested herbs, creating teas, salves, syrups and vapors to treat members of the community. Lawhon captures this in exceptionally detailed writing that demonstrates Ballard's commitment to her craft.

Indeed, Lawhon's writing is so clear, expressive and compelling that it's easy to find yourself transported back to the late 1700s when our nation was in its infancy.

That may also frustrate you, because it was a time when women were not considered equal to men. They were prohibited from testifying in court unless a husband or father was present, and could be charged with fornication prior to marriage while men suffered no consequences.

The Author's Note at the end of the book is also a must read. However, as Lawhon herself writes at the start of the note, DO NOT read it before finishing the novel.

"The Frozen River" hooked me right from the beginning, satisfied me at the end, and kept me engaged throughout. I give it a full 5 out of 5 stars, and encourage you to check it out.