

Tucker Pens ‘An Uncertain Peace’

James Craig Tucker has been living a double life. Though the world knows him as an accomplished visual artist, inside was lurking a nascent desire to express another side of himself, and in a new medium: words. Though not hidden, it lay dormant for long periods, arising briefly only to be tucked away again as life demanded. In October, the other side of Jim Tucker was revealed, fully realized. His first novel, “An Uncertain Peace,” was launched at In-Town Gallery in Chattanooga, where he’s been a member for many years. It had been a long time coming.

Though a Yankee originally from Connecticut, Jim Tucker lived in Clemson, S.C., from the age of 10 until he went off to the University of Georgia. His interest in history resulted in a major in the subject, superseding his boyhood passion for drawing and painting, though he did minor in art. He came to enjoy writing term papers, saying, “Those 20-page dives into the past became a ‘gateway drug.’” The need to indulge would arise again throughout the years ahead.

Fine art painting dominated Tucker’s life as a younger man. He established and ran an art frame company for 10 years, showed in galleries throughout the 1970s and 1980s, then worked for 20 years at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in various capacities on the business side. As the new century began, Tucker and his wife, **Deb**, moved to the Cumberland Plateau where he worked for the next seven years as admissions director of St. Andrew’s-Sewanee School. During those years his novel began to take shape.

Though never quite satisfied with earlier attempts, Tucker knew he still had a story to tell, and Deb gently nudged him toward it. In the late 1990s in a coffee shop in Mobile, Ala., they outlined the story. Several years of research ensued. From 2002 to his retirement from St. Andrew’s in 2009, he wrote, edited, and rewrote the first draft. Then he put the novel aside. Tucker got heavily into art again, but kept writing, producing articles about local artists for galleries, newspapers, and online “zines” (short for magazines and pronounced “zeen”).

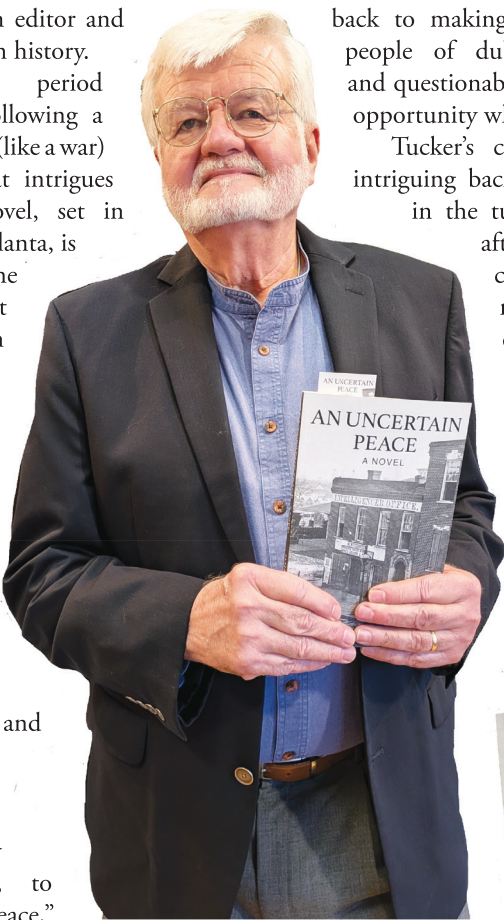
When the pandemic arrived and he had the time, he undertook what he thought was a “thoroughly professional edit” of the manuscript; certain it was ready for publication. Advice from another writer resulted in two more years

working with an editor and later, an expert in history.

The period “immediately following a social upheaval” (like a war) is a subject that intrigues Tucker. His novel, set in post-civil war Atlanta, is not a story of the Civil War, but an exploration of the “struggle for peace” that followed it. The war is over, but no one trusts that peace will hold. The country is struggling to resolve old divisions, yet suspicious and untrusting of the “other.” The city is occupied by Federal troops, to “keep the peace,” creating anxiety and disputes about exactly who’s in charge. Everyone is trying to recover from personal losses and rebuild, but at the mercy of unscrupulous people and an unpredictable future.

Tucker’s novel, “An Uncertain Peace,” takes us to Atlanta in 1866 and, like all good historical fiction, skillfully combines fact and imagination. Historically accurate and filled with an artist’s descriptive details, his story immediately draws the reader into the time and place. He knows the city well, having walked the same streets while living there. Located where four railroad lines intersected, Atlanta was primarily a distribution center, especially during the Civil War. It was in the South, but not “of the South,” not truly “Southern” in the cultural sense.

Non-agrarian, it didn’t depend on the plantation system, nor suffer, in the same ways, the years of deprivation and loss of a way of life as the rest of the South did. Atlanta’s residents, many from outside the region with no attachment to it, built an economy based on railroads and manufacturing. They wanted to leave the past behind, look ahead, and get



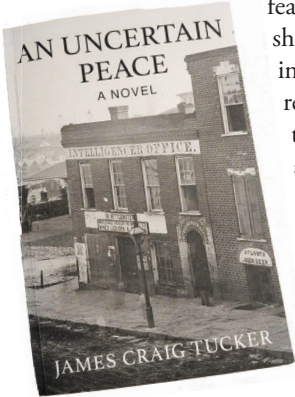
Author and artist Jim Tucker

back to making money, attracting people of dubious backgrounds and questionable ethics, who knew opportunity when they saw it.

Tucker’s characters, all with intriguing backstories, are caught in the turmoil of the war’s aftermath and a culture clash. The number of formerly enslaved people has doubled, and camps of displaced people ring the city. It’s a hardscrabble life; people do what is necessary to survive. His protagonist, Allan Ramsey, who has his share of war wounds, physical and otherwise, had been a captain in Sherman’s army and now works for the *Intelligencer* newspaper. Why has he come back to Atlanta?

The alluring Samantha Frazier has quite a list of aliases. Deputy Marshall Ed Sprague is a former bounty hunter and polices the city according to his own set of rules. And Georgiana is a successful businesswoman who wields power from the shadows. What makes them and the other characters relatable is how *normal* they are. We recognize them. We can identify with them. Everyone has been damaged, and they’re caught between the circumstances of the present and their own shortcomings. These people are struggling toward healing their own losses, setting in motion a chain of events that will change them all.

The book opens with a bang, literally. In a few pages, an ambush



The new novel by Jim Tucker, *An Uncertain Peace*, is about Atlanta a year after the Civil War.

occurs, a saloon burns down, a man is assaulted, and a body is found on the railroad tracks. Readers are immediately thrust into the action and the story is underway. This is a frontier town trying to grow up. Mystery and intrigue seem to underlie every situation, and Tucker effectively interweaves historical events with fictional ones that could have happened. Through dialogue and description, characters’ motives unfold, actions become understandable. It’s a compelling story, well-told, that explores issues revelatory of the past and relevant to the present.

Once the novel was ready for publication, Tucker returned to art, creating a collection of ink drawings taken from his reference materials, though they are not connected to the novel. Just 10 days before his book launch, he was featured artist at In-Town Gallery. His show, entitled “Living Stories,” are ink drawings taken from images that resonated with him. To Tucker, each told a story, specific to that image alone. Because they reminded him of old photos, he chose to work in black and white. Feeling they required varied artistic approaches, he used different techniques to create them.

Tucker believes “there is a unique story for every person. We live our stories; they change and shape us ... Most of all, they show in our faces.” This is true of his drawings, too. He is inviting us to “look closely at them” and imagine what their story might be. What we imagine will be as individual as each of us is. The exhibit premiered on October 1, showcased on the gallery’s front wall. It will be hanging throughout November.

The month of October was a time of fulfillment for this artist-writer. Something he’d worked hard to do, something he’d longed to be had come to fruition. As the night of his book launch approached, James Craig Tucker said to himself, “Two of the loves of my life (wife and children excepted) will be there, sitting together for a change, sharing the evening.”

“An Uncertain Peace” is available on Amazon. In-Town Gallery is located at 26A Frazier Ave, Chattanooga.

by Carol Lannon



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