

## INK – Incredible Journey



+ By Vicki Meade + Photos courtesy of Tom Guay

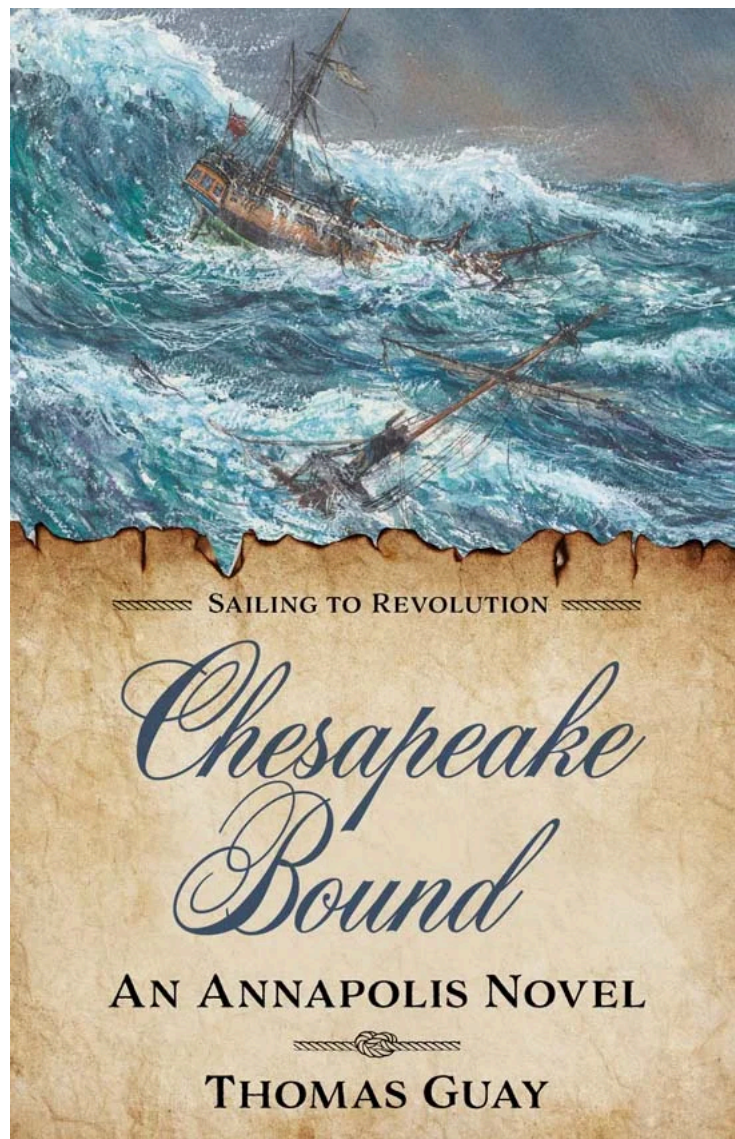
When Michael Shea's hands are tied and he's imprisoned in the dark, smelly brig of a wooden sailing ship, Tom Guay doesn't know how to save him.

The fictional Shea is the main character in Guay's debut book, *Chesapeake Bound: An Annapolis Novel*, published by McBooks Press in April. It's the first part of a trilogy set for release on a to-be-determined schedule.

Guay is very fond of Shea, an Irish immigrant in London who in 1763 helps Charles Carroll (who in actuality became the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence) recover from smallpox. "Michael is everything I wish I could be," says Guay: a virtuoso musician, a handsome charmer, a fluent French speaker. But now, Shea is trapped below deck, haunted by nightmarish hallucinations.

"I was writing away," says Guay, "and the muse said, 'Put him in the hold.' So I did. And then I thought, 'What does he do while he's in there? And how do I get him out?'"

Guay toyed for years with the idea of writing a novel but didn't start in earnest until 2007. A longtime Capitol Hill reporter covering environmental regulations, he moved from Silver Spring to the Annapolis area in 1999, bought his first sailboat, and started playing music—fiddle and guitar—with the popular local band the Eastport Oyster Boys. He considered writing a detective story, but then he thought, "I'm a sailor now, I'm a history geek all the way. How can I combine the two?"



Chesapeake Bound: An Annapolis Novel.

*Chesapeake Bound* is the tale of Shea, a fiddler and medical apprentice, and his musician friend, Daniel O'Mara, who sign onto a ship bound for Annapolis as lowly indentured servants to escape England after Shea is framed for murder. Along the way, they endure transatlantic storms, accidents, sickness, and Barbary pirates. Guay, too, faced obstacles—maybe not as dramatic as Shea's—on his 18-year journey to achieve his first published novel.

Taking a creative writing class from Lynn Auld Schwartz in 2007 launched him on his way. "Tom was a real standout," says Schwartz, an Annapolis-based writer, editor, and instructor who's helped thousands of aspiring authors improve their dialogue, characters, scenes, and plot. "He was so serious about developing his skill and so good at dialogue. When people first start writing historical fiction, they often get so excited by their research that the facts overshadow the story. But in Tom's work, the humanness was always shining through."

"I was really ignorant about story arcs and mechanics," Guay says of himself before taking Schwartz's class. But once he was armed with his new skills, he had his wife, Karen, drop him off each morning at St. John's College, where he'd type on his laptop in the McDowell Hall coffee shop. In between bouts of writing, he'd delve into eighteenth-century research, such as the persecution of Catholics, the lives of indentured servants, the perils of ocean voyages, the plight of slaves, and the sparks that led to the American Revolution.





Guay at bookstór in Kinsale.

Guay has loved seafaring adventures since childhood, when he watched the films *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and others of their ilk. As a youngster, he immersed himself in books about World War II and Pearl Harbor. “Anything that had a boat in the Pacific campaign, I read,” he says. “My mom was a librarian, always chasing us out of the house, saying, ‘Go to the library.’” His father, who worked for the navy and sometimes spent time on ships and submarines, connected Guay and his six siblings with the sea when he brought them on trips along the Atlantic coast.

A lover of detective stories and mysteries, Guay devoured the entire collection of Patrick O’Brian novels set in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars. Music is another of his passions. He started trumpet lessons in elementary school and a year later picked up the guitar. He played in bands during his college years at the University of Maryland, was part of an Irish folk group in Washington, DC, and taught himself the hammered dulcimer.

In his mid-40s, Guay tried learning to play his grandfather’s old fiddle. “I couldn’t make heads or tails out of it,” he says, so, as a birthday present, Guay’s wife bought him fiddle lessons with an Irish music teacher. He continued those studies for seven years, until he felt proficient enough to play in public. “I’ll never be as good as my character Michael Shea,” Guay says with a laugh. “He’s more of a musical genius, like Mozart.”

Though he didn’t learn to sail until well into adulthood, Guay took to it right away and soon was crewing on a friend’s boat during Wednesday Night Races in Annapolis. “Owning a sailboat opens up this dream world,” he says. “Even if it’s just going over to Kent Island, sailing screams adventure to me.”

It’s no surprise that, as Guay developed his manuscript, he combined sailing, music, history, and adventure. And including natural medicine taps into Guay’s roots, too, because his father’s great-aunt was an herbalist. “When my dad was growing up, if he had a cough or toothache, she’d pull out spices and herbs and make a tea of some sort,” he says, “and it worked.”

Guay's first draft was a romp featuring an eighteenth-century *musicioner*, a term coined by an Annapolis physician who founded a men's club in 1745. After writing it as a screenplay, Guay threw it away. He switched to a novel, following a rough outline, a few bullet points of ideas, and the hero's journey narrative structure, in which the protagonist travels into the unknown and faces trials along the way.



Guay at Shakespeare and Company in Paris.

As years passed, Guay would work on the book, set it aside, and then pick it up again. “Fortunately, I had other things going on,” he says. Performing and touring with the Eastport Oyster Boys, writing songs, serving as a docent at the Charles Carroll House, playing fiddle on the schooner *Woodwind*, leading Watermark tour groups, and working for the Severn River Association kept him busy. When he felt that the manuscript was ready, he started sending query letters to literary agents. He received more than 50 rejections. “I’m surprised I didn’t give up,” he says.

But in January 2024, on a tip from the editor of *SpinSheet* magazine, he bypassed the agent route and contacted McBooks Press, an imprint of the Globe Pequot Publishing Group, which specializes in nautical fiction. “The acquisitions editor said, ‘Send me the manuscript’ and a week later told me, ‘We’re going to buy it.’” As the weeks unfolded, Guay had to rework the manuscript (the publisher wanted 20,000 words cut) and then navigate the yearlong production schedule: editing, cover design, page layout, proofreading. After the thrill of holding his first printed copy, Guay embarked on a flurry of author talks and book signings and jumped into the hard work of promoting his novel to bookstores, historical societies, museums, and gift shops. “I have a lot of new hats to wear and marketing skills to acquire,” he says.



Guay credits the book *The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield for teaching him how to break down creative barriers and keep plugging ahead. “He opened my ears to the idea of muses—a source of artistic inspiration. Each time I sit down to write, I follow Pressfield’s lead and recite [T. E. Lawrence’s translation of] the invocation to the muse from [the first lines of] Homer’s *Odyssey*. It helps me push through resistance, or what you might call procrastination.” He likes the image of ancient Greek goddesses whispering in his ear to give him ideas, he says, and the invocation is almost like a prayer.

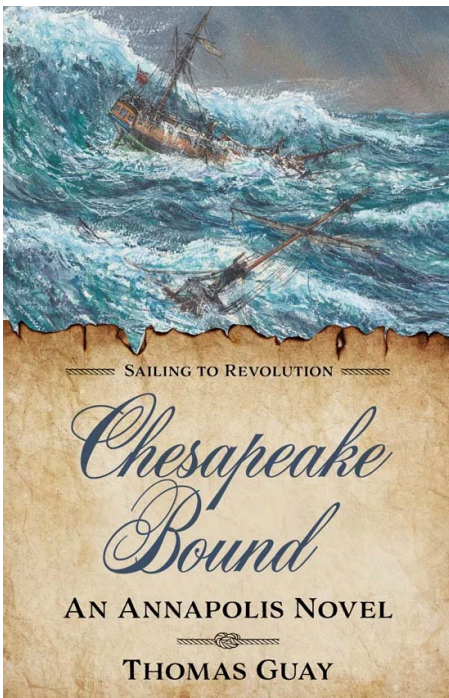
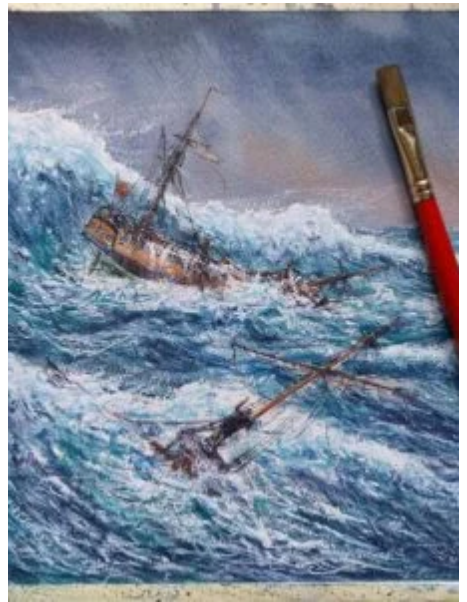
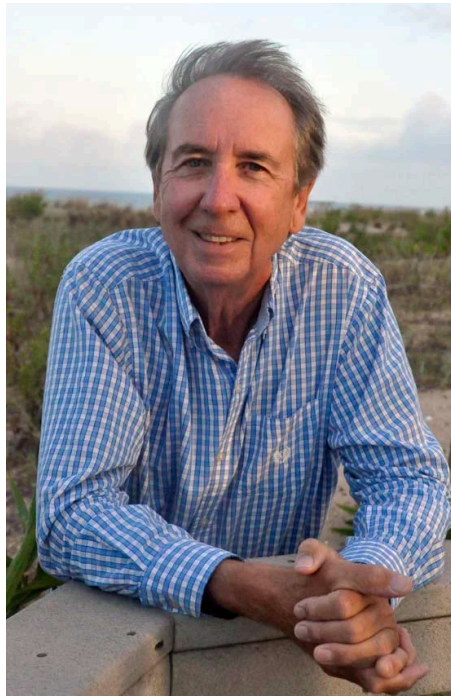
So, yes, thanks to the muses, Guay finally figured out how to free Michael Shea from his inky prison. “It was a challenge to pull off that section,” he says.

“Tom is an incredible inspiration,” says Schwartz. “To be a writer is hard. You’re working alone, you’re constantly revising and polishing. I know so many people who give up and never finish. But he kept at it, making it better, always believing in it. To me, that’s amazing.” v

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