

NEW VOICES

Dark secrets, deadly deeds and beauty are tightly interlaced in the novels of debut novelists Kate Howard, Ellen Prentiss Campbell, Anna Mazzola and Alix Rickloff.

Ellen Prentiss Campbell, author of *The Bowl with Gold Seams* (Apprentice House Press, 2016) believes that: “Historical fiction is an alchemist’s mixture of fact and imagination, a past event, a person, a time, a place, attracts the author to become researcher, archaeologist, anthropologist — a time-travelling storyteller.” These ideas are key in her novel, which, she explains, “is set at the renowned resort, Bedford Springs, during the summer of 1945 when the secluded hotel in rural Pennsylvania served as detainment camp for the Japanese ambassador to Germany, his staff and their families.”

Campbell, who has spent her holidays near this hotel for more than fifty years, says, “The detainment is little spoken of; I learned of it during the uneasy months following 9/11. I had not suffered a personal loss when the Twin Towers went down, but soon afterward my parents died, my twin towers. Aware that death silences voices and stories, I began writing stories of my own, after years listening to others’ as a psychotherapist.”

Having retreated to her Pennsylvania farm to work, Campbell used her breaks, she says, “to read my father’s wartime letters to my mother — one-sided correspondence; she saved his every letter and v-mail, while hers were lost. I walked the grounds of Bedford Springs. The shuttered buildings — closed since 1985 — intrigued me; I visited the local historical society and learned of the hotel’s surprising role as prison in 1945. Fascinated, I continued researching at the National Archives.”

It was at this point that Campbell began to write. She notes, “A voice demanded to tell the story: imagining local newlywed Hazel Shaw, working at the hotel while waiting for news of her husband, missing in the Pacific Theater. Hazel’s wartime experience shatters her life. War ends; the Japanese are deported. One of them leaves something for Hazel: a bowl — *kintsugi*, broken porcelain intentionally mended with golden glue; damage made beautiful. This bowl with gold seams becomes emblematic for Hazel of her task: to mend her life, to make her own *Bowl with Gold Seams*.”

In a strange twist of fate, Campbell explains, “Over the years I wrote this story, my grief mended, and — miraculously — the Bedford Springs Hotel was restored. Life is at least as strange as fiction; historical fiction blends both.”

Kate Howard’s *The Ornatrix* (Gerald Duckworth UK /

Overlook US, 2016) is set in Renaissance Italy, but as with Campbell’s novel, Howard also investigates the nature of “flawed beauty.” There is a passage in the novel, Howard says, “where the central character Flavia, a Renaissance beautician, questions the merits of applying successive layers of thick white lead paint to the skin of her clients (at least one of whom has never entirely washed off her cosmetics).” Finally, Howard notes, “Flavia has to conclude that ‘a plasterer who covered rotten walls without scraping the mould off first would not keep his job long.’ This is a fair analogy, since many of the cosmetics in Renaissance Italy relied on the same base ingredients and recipes as the paints used in frescoes — the vibrant wall paintings that still adorn so many churches and houses across the country — and there is something not just of the make-up artist, but also the building contractor in the roles Flavia has to perform for her wealthy clients. Whether as a plasterer of rotten skin or a scaffolder of towering hair, she must make something both structural and beautiful from frequently unsound materials.”

Howard continues, “Much has been made in the last few weeks about Italian building techniques in the light of the most recent devastating earthquake to hit the central region of that country. It’s an area I know well, and where I worked restoring an old house that had once been a Roman lookout nesting high above the Via Flaminia — one of the main routes up the spine of Italy. The house was a collage of time: a collection of Roman and medieval up to its most recent restoration by the previous owners. Not one of its many occupants had scraped it back to its origins. They had merely added layer upon layer of plaster and cement and tile, shoring up the threatened rock fall and patching over the cracks.”

At the time, Howard notes, her partner “found all this quite infuriating. He dug out the ancient crumbly cement and repointed walls, built extensions that didn’t quite match the existing building ... My methodology was more like Flavia’s — and the generations of indifferent builders who had gone before. I chipped off what was obviously bad then mixed a big bucket of something thick enough to scrape an approximation of flatness back over the surface. It wasn’t very pretty but it felt like the house knew what I was doing and didn’t altogether disapprove.”

It was the “mixing and spreading plaster” Howard says, “that helped me into the role of writing about my very own ‘Ornatrix,’ Flavia: both of us givers of a flawed kind of beauty to beings who had suffered many years of imperfect attentions, but who nonetheless still stood tall.”

Even though Howard no longer owns “the ancient cobbled-together house,” she says she’s “painfully aware that it has survived the latest in a string of seismic disasters that have felled much newer buildings. And so it is in *The Ornatrix*...that the

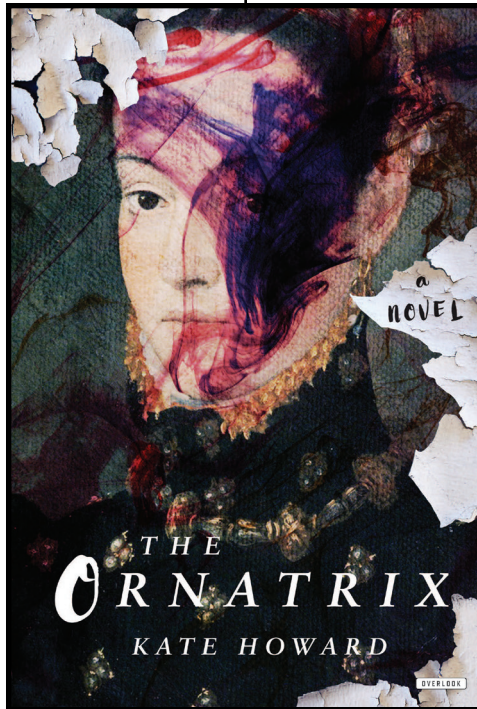
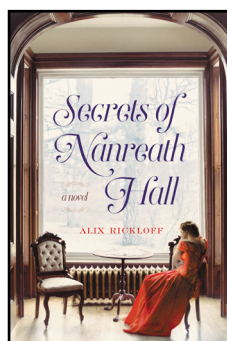
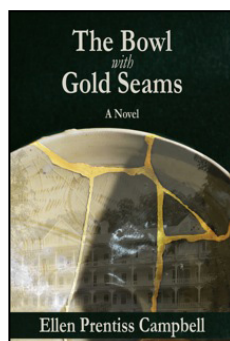
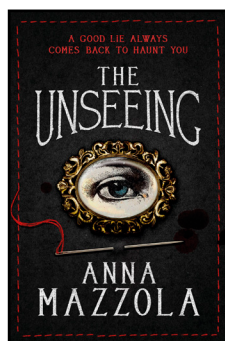




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Left to right: Kate Howard, Ellen Prentiss Campbell, Alix Rickloff & Anna Mazzola



older, the rotten and re-plastered women, often seem to endure life with greater resilience than their younger counterparts.”

Alix Rickloff’s *Secrets of Nanreath Hall* (William Morrow, 2016), unlike Howard’s novel, involves a different kind of “plastering” — the lies that are told in the name of love. Rickloff’s says her novel began as “a collision of circumstance and inspiration and ended as a book of the heart.” She found herself between publishing contracts, and then during a phone call with her agent, Rickloff was asked a fateful question: what do you really want to write about?

Rickloff explains, “I’d been interested in the 1940s ever since I watched Greer Garson in *Mrs. Miniver* back in college. I started reading military histories, social memoirs, collected letters, journalistic accounts, and novels set during the era. But for twenty plus years and nine plus books, it remained a side interest.”

She adds, “Now, I was being asked if I wanted to set a book during this tumultuous time period. It was a dream come true and, better yet, I already had the seeds of an idea. You see, I’d been watching a certain popular BBC series set on a fictional British country estate and, while the adults’ melodramas kept me glued to my set, it was the seldom-seen children on the show who sparked my writer curiosity.”

“The fatherless heir to an earldom” and “the daughter of a scandalous elopement,” says Rickloff, “screamed out for stories of their own. I began to wonder who these characters were, how their lives might have been shaped by their contrasting upbringings, and how WWII would have affected them as young adults...By the time I typed ‘The End,’ it grew to encompass two wars, two women, the struggles we endure to find our place in

the world, and the lies we tell in the name of love.”

The Unseeing (Headline UK, 2016 / Sourcebooks Landmark US, 2017) by Anna Mazzola was inspired by a murder, which she first came across while reading *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*. She says, “the crime is mentioned only briefly, but grabbed my attention because it took place in Camberwell, not far from where I live. It was known as the ‘Edgeware Road Murder’ as the first body part was found beneath a paving slab off the Edgeware Road in December 1836. A grisly treasure hunt led officers of the Metropolitan Police to James Greenacre, a cabinet-maker.”

However, Mazzola continues, “when the police arrived to arrest Greenacre, they found a woman sitting up in his bed: Sarah Gale. They noticed that she was trying to hide some jewelry ... so she too was arrested and taken to the cells with her young son. Amid great public excitement, the case proceeded to trial. Greenacre was found guilty of the murder of Hannah Brown, Gale of aiding and abetting him. During the trial, Sarah Gale gave only a short statement, read by her barrister, saying that she knew nothing of the crime. That was what really interested me when I first read into the case: why, when faced with the death sentence and accused of helping to conceal the most heinous crime, did Sarah Gale fail to fully defend herself?”

Mazzola explains, “*The Unseeing* begins with the appointment of the lawyer who will investigate Sarah’s petition for mercy, Edmund Fleetwood. Over the course of the novel, Edmund – and the reader – must determine whether Sarah is telling the truth when she says that she knew nothing of the murder. That reflects the process I myself went through when investigating the scant evidence that still exists: could she really have been blind to what had happened, or did she know and keep quiet?”

The quest to investigate history, interweave it with speculation and create seamless historical fiction, is an admirable aspiration, and one pursued by Howard, Campbell, Mazzola and Rickloff in their debut novels. ❀

MYFANWY COOK admires the ingenuity of debut novelists and their ability to share new stories to entertain readers of historical fiction. Please email (myfanwyc@btinternet.com) or tweet (twitter.com/Myfanwy-Cook) about debut novelists you recommend.

