Katherine Howe: A Passion for Architecture, History, Magic

Titanic tragedy plays central role in new novel

BY CINDY WOLFE BOYNTON

KATHERINE HOWE PROBABLY wouldn’t be a New York Times best-selling novelist if it hadn’t been for a BU professor.

Keith Morgan, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of American and European architecture, spurred Howe’s interest in writing historic fiction, and her imagination. “I’d walk around Boston or Marblehead, where I lived, look at the houses, and then squint my eyes and start imagining who lived there,” says Howe (GRS’05,’12). “I’d wonder, what happened to the people who lived in these houses? Massachusetts is so steeped in history that if you try, you can look at a house or a street and really start seeing who and what might have been there before.”

Like her first novel, The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane, published in 2009, much of her latest is set on Bay State streets. The backdrop of The House of Velvet and Glass is turn-of-the-20th-century Boston, when buildings, streetlights, railroads, and other aspects of the modern city were just beginning to take shape. Originally scheduled for a May release, Hyperion Books decided to move up the novel’s release to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, which plays a major role in the story.

The book opens in the Beacon Hill parlor of Mrs. Dee, a medium, where protagonist Sybil Allston hopes to communicate with the spirits of her mother and sister, who were among the 1,514 who perished in the April 15, 1912, disaster.

Magic occurs in Mrs. Dee’s scrying glass. And sparks fly as Sybil and Harvard psychology professor Benton Derby work together to solve a mystery related to both the Titanic’s sinking and the Allston family’s past. Howe takes readers from the 1915 opium dens of Boston’s Chinatown to the back alleys of the Old City of Shanghai, China.

“I could write straight fiction, but magic or any kind of paranormal element makes for a story that’s more fun,” says Howe from her home in Ithaca, N. Y. “I’m also really interested in writing stories that show people’s different beliefs, in writing stories that explore our country’s intellectual history and how beliefs change over time.”

A main theme in The House of Velvet and Glass is spiritualism—the belief that spirits of the dead could, and want to, communicate with the living—which was close to its height in 1915. “Ads for séances were listed in newspapers next to church services,” Howe says. “Seeing a medium was a very normal thing to do.”

Normal for Howe these days is thinking, obsessively sometimes, about writing, and not just fiction. She’s within months of reaching the seven-year limit for completing her PhD in American and New England studies and needs to concentrate on completing and then submitting her dissertation to her advisor, Brendan McConville, a CAS professor of history.

“He and BU have been tapping their toes really loudly,” she says.

Like Physick Book’s main character, doctoral student in history Connie Goodwin, whose dissertation focuses on the need to change the image of early American “cunning women,” an early term for witches, Howe’s dissertation is an edited and contextualized collection of primary sources on witchcraft in North America.

“ Fiction, in this case, is very close to real life, or maybe it’s the other way around,” says Howe, who originally came to BU to earn a master’s in art history. However, some architectural history classes, and the growing wish that a “big book of what really happened” existed, made her realize that she’d find more fulfillment, and perhaps make a larger contribution, by focusing on American and New England studies.

“One of historians’ greatest challenges is to create a single narrative of what happened at events, and to people, at different time periods,” she says. “Historic fiction doesn’t do that exactly, but it does provide the opportunity to create a window in time, which is challenging and creative, as well as a great way to see how society’s views of reality have changed.”

The belief that spirits of the dead want to communicate with the living is a main theme in Katherine Howe’s new book.