

ALAN CHARTOCK GETS IN TROUBLE
WOMEN WRITERS AT THE MOUNT

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SPECIAL PLACE
Natalie Dykstra lingers within Edith Wharton's personal library at The Mount during her residency earlier this year.

Living With Edith

WOMEN WRITERS INHABIT THE MOUNT // BY ANASTASIA STANMEYER

» TO GAZE through the same window as Edith Wharton did, to walk within the home reflected in her writings, to pass through the expansive hallways, to linger for hours in the novelist's personal library—this is what three writers each savored while staying in her autobiographical house.

At the invitation of The Mount's director, Francesca Segal, Kate Bolick, and Natalie Dykstra spent anywhere from a week to a month in residence, inhabiting an iconic home and a testimony of ideas that Wharton herself

set out in *The Decoration of Houses*.

When Bolick arrived for her residency in January 2014, she surveyed the various parts of the house before settling in the drawing room for its natural light. It was such a change from her small, Brooklyn home office, she says as she recalls Wharton's spacious country home. "I felt connected to the life Wharton created for herself and how the architecture was manifested in her writing," reflects Bolick.

When Dykstra came to The Mount the following winter,

she also moseyed around for a good day before unfolding a table next to Wharton's desk in the library. As she worked on her laptop, she often glanced at a nearby black-and-white photograph of Henry James, Teddy Wharton, and Howard Sturgis taken on The Mount's terrace, and envisioned the three standing there. She leafed through the *Science of English Verse*, written in 1880 by Sidney Lanier and peppered with Wharton's marginalia.

Here in this empty house, except for the occasional tour group passing through, the visiting author of *Clover*

Adams: A Guided and Heartbreaking Life, was able to pare down her distractions, sink into writing an article for a literary magazine, and think about her next book. "I just never wanted to be anywhere else but the library, maybe because I'm a library and archives hound," says Dykstra. All the history that surrounds the home focuses the mind, she says. "It's like this external support."

Dykstra, who teaches *Age of Innocence* to her English students at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, believes that Wharton's oeuvre of

40 books has much to convey about the division of rich and poor, social structure, and the creative self. She equates Wharton's sentences to The Mount's architecture: "The poeticness is expanded here."

Today, The Mount in Lenox has reawakened into a literary hub, hosting readings, book launches, writers-festival events, and panel discussions. The recently created Edith Wharton Writer-in-Residence Program will offer two-week-long opportunities for writers with a stipend and lodging nearby—application for the first one opens July 1. "It was built to be a writer's house, and we wanted to carry on that tradition," says Rebecka McDougall, The Mount's communications director.

Bolick's first visit to The Mount was years ago—when the property was at risk of foreclosure—prompting her to write "Save the Mount!" for *Slate* in April 2008. (Today, the historical site faces renewed concerns to pay off a \$3.8-million debt by June 2016.) Bolick returned to host the Touchstones Series, then for a one-week residency to work on a chapter

about Wharton in her new book, *Spinster*. The topic of single women as a historical archetype has interested Bolick for a long time, and in 2011, she focused on the growth of the single-person demographic to author "All the Single Ladies" for *The Atlantic* that September. Written over two years, *Spinster* was just released this year on April 21.

The book highlights not only the Pulitzer Prize-winning Wharton, but also columnist Neith Boyce, essayist Maeve Brennan, social visionary Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and poet Edna St. Vincent Millay—how they navigated career, marriage, life. Bolick turns the word "spinster" on its head, changing it from a derogatory term to convey instead a more enlightened meaning—a sisterhood of women living on their own terms.

"What I'm really writing about is how we think about relationships in our life, and all of us are going to be alone at some point," says Bolick, who will hold a reading and reception of *Spinster* on May 15 at The Mount. She also will host the second Touchstones Series on Thursday evenings in September there.

"Being at The Mount deepened my understanding of Wharton's architectural project and ideas and experiencing the graciousness of day-to-day life. It was so different than how I live in my tiny apartment in Brooklyn. Space that was so spacious and well organized was clarifying for me, and it also made me feel my own power—it was chilling in the best way."

The Massachusetts native recalls wearing a hat, scarf, and two sweaters while taking residency at The Mount for a week—and loving it. "It was being not only in her house but in her landscape at a time of year that was timeless. The snow erased the distance of time between us," Bolick says.

Although she doesn't see parallels between herself and Wharton—Bolick is single and 42; Wharton had a failed marriage, lived a societal lifestyle, and divorced in her 40s—Wharton had a direct and major influence on Bolick's thinking of people's spacial relationship. "That gift she gave me has been a large part of my intellectual life, and a big theme of the book, about spaces in which we live and how we negotiate those spaces."



KATE BOLICK The author of *Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own* will read from her new book on May 15 at The Mount. There will be a Q&A and book signing. Admission to *One's Own* is \$10 and includes hors d'oeuvres and cocktails.

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