

The Berkshire Eagle

BERKSHIRE LIFESTYLES

Three writers find inspiration at Edith Wharton's home in Lenox

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The Mount is currently hosting three writers as part of its first formal writers-in-residence program. (Berkshire Eagle file photo)

By Kate Abbott >> Special to The Eagle

POSTED: 03/11/2016 10:31:03 AM EST

LENOX >> In the bedroom, looking over the terrace to the lake, Claire McMillan traces the adventures of an artifact necklace from the 1920s.

In the boudoir, Yvonne Puig works out a careful balance between friendship and love.

In the sewing room, Koren Zailckas careers through a thriller about a con artist, identity thief and a social climber.

Edith Wharton's house is full of writers — as the staff of The Mount feel it should be.

Here, Wharton built her writing career and brought her friends to read Walt Whitman on summer nights. Now three novelists are spending two weeks each as writers-in-residence in the program's first official year, said Rebecka McDougall, communications director. The writers will talk about the experience, their writing and their ties to Wharton in a panel talk with the Berkshire Festival of Women Writers on Monday.

In past years, The Mount has informally invited writers they know and have worked with to spend time at the house; this year they have launched a formal residency and welcomed applicants from across the country.

Some 40 to 50 writers responded, said Abbie Wilson, public programs coordinator — all kinds of writers: poets, novelists and non-fiction writers, a science writer, a playwright, writers late in their careers and writers just beginning.

She vividly remembers talking with these three.

"I could hear in their voices," she said, "they were so excited about the idea of coming here, so passionate and inspired to dig into their next work here. They didn't want any writing residency — they wanted this one."

All three have found this time in Wharton's space restorative.

"We're all saying it's magic," McMillan said.

"It's so productive," Puig said, "and so calm."

At her table in the boudoir, she is writing by hand, so she will not edit too much too early. She has just finished her forthcoming first novel, "A Wife of Noble Character," inspired by Wharton's "The House of Mirth," but moved to a setting of Texas oil money, and she is early in her second book.

McMillan has also drawn inspiration from "The House of Mirth" in her novel, "Gilded Age," set in old-money Cleveland, and she is finishing a new novel moving from the jazz age to the present day.

She read "House of Mirth" as a high school sophomore.

"It was a book you read at exactly the right time in your life," she said.

Years later, when she had written a novel, seen it rejected and put it in a drawer, her husband gave her a first edition of "The House of Mirth," knowing how much it has meant to her. Her old copy was disintegrating, and she re-read the book.

"The themes still hold," she said, even in a world where a woman is running for president. "As you read — as with Austen or the Brontës — what we have isn't the sci-fi trip back to old New York — it's that we know a Lily Bart or a Darcy or an Elizabeth."

She admires Wharton for "her ability as a writer and as a person to be of a specific world and still skewer it.

"She has so much insight and intellectual ability," she said, and incisive humor.

Zailckas finds in Wharton the punk rock bravery of no-one-is-spared.

"She doesn't flinch or turn away from anything difficult," she said. " she shows and makes you feel acutely how much more freedom men had."

Zailckas, known first for her best-selling memoir, "Smashed," has brought theme and tone Wharton could have found familiar into her first novel, "Mother, Mother" — a family disintegrating as they try to keep up appearances, power struggles under social pressure, and an autocratic mother a fair match for Wharton's own.

She is reading "Custom of the Country" now, at the suggestion of several of the Mount staff, as she is finishing her own book and developing her con artist.

McMillan has started "Mother's Recompense" here, one of the few novels Wharton set in the 1920s.

"It has a ripper of a plot," she said.

Outside of their writing days, the three novelists are staying in the same house with a friend of the Mount, and they are enjoying the company — getting to be Wharton fan girls together. It is good to talk with people who know Wharton, Puig said — she lives in Los Angeles, and it's not something that comes up in conversation. Here they can talk about Wharton's novels and her life, and people will understand their excitement and all their references.

"And the staff are so excited we're here," McMillan said.

"Their passion for Wharton is infectious," Zailckas agreed, "making you want to work." And in her home, they are finding new connections to Wharton herself.

"Being here makes her more of a human being," McMillan said. " she loved gardens and dogs."

"And beautiful spaces," Zailckas said, looking out from the circle of chairs in the parlor.

"Henry James said she was a force of nature," McMillan said. " She was private too."

And she could be fearless in her curiosity. McMillan recalled a letter Wharton sent to her husband's psychiatrist asking about suicide, about the psychology of it, the means, how a young woman might think about it.

For her, that letter is evidence to her that Lily Bart killed herself in "The House of Mirth," though she knows some critics disagree.

"The way she wrote that scene, it's so elegant, you have that question," she said.

"She wanted us to always wonder," Puig said. "It adds to the heartbreak."

If you go ...

What: Writers in the House, co-sponsored by the Berkshire Festival of Women Writers

When: 3:30 p.m. Monday, March 14

Where: The Mount, 2 Plunkett St., Lenox

Admission: Free

Information: edithwharton.org



Author Claire McMillan is finishing a new novel while in residence at The Mount. (Courtesy of The Mount)



Yvonne Puig has recently finished her first novel, "A Wife of Noble Character." (Courtesy of The Mount)



Koren Zailckas is known for her best-selling memoir "Smashed." (Courtesy of The Mount)

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