

# the Berkshire edge

## Three women writers relish residency at The Mount

By [Hannah Van Sickle](#) Wednesday, Mar 21 [Arts & Entertainment](#)



The Mount in Lenox hosted a 'Writers in the House' event March 20, with the 2018 Edith Wharton Writers in Residence Elif Batuman, Buzzy Jackson and Kate Reed Petty. Photo courtesy The Mount

Lenox — Edith Wharton would have likely been thrilled at the thought of three women writers taking up residence at the Mount to immerse themselves in all matters of a craft she loved. The 2018 Edith Wharton Writers in Residence traveled to the author's Lenox home, each for the first time and from an alliterative trio of locales: Boulder, Baltimore and Brooklyn. Their arrival, in the midst of a March snowstorm, was a veritable “Ethan Frome” moment — a detail not lost on award-winning novelist Elif Batuman, book critic and historian Buzzy Jackson, and freelance writer and editor Kate Reed Petty. The three finalists were selected from a pool of over 130 applicants and have been in

residence for two weeks this month. Their collective time in Lenox culminated Tuesday afternoon (March 20) in a public event, “Writers in the House,” facilitated by Donna Lucey and featuring excerpts from each author’s work. I had the pleasure of sitting down with the group prior to the reading to reflect on their experiences, both individual and collective, while literally inhabiting the halls Wharton once roamed.

“[It is] impressive – inspiring, really – how seriously [Wharton] picked her identity at a really young age and stuck with it. It’s who she was,” said Jackson, deeming the residency a real honor, considering that Wharton’s name resides within the proverbial pantheon of American literature. “Women struggle today to take themselves seriously in many capacities,” added Petty, citing the prevalence of “impostor syndrome” – the inability to internalize one’s accomplishments while persistently fearing being exposed as a fraud – as interfering with many rising women today. For each writer, who experienced the power of place by settling into the nooks and crannies of the place Wharton once called home, the vantage point is symbolic: the windows, whose panes are made of old, warped glass, became both literal and figurative lenses for looking at the world.



From left: Elif Batuman, Buzzy Jackson and Kate Reed Petty, the Mount’s 2018 Edith Wharton Writers in Residence. Photos courtesy the Mount

Wharton (1862-1937) was born into a tightly controlled society at a time when women were discouraged from achieving anything beyond proper marriages. Wharton, unlike her brothers, was educated by a governess (boys were provided with tutors); Batuman’s fascination on the subject was most evident: “[Wharton had] no classical education — but she read German philosophy...she did not let the maximal rigors [and] lack of credentials intimidate her, [or] limit her,” Batuman added. It was at the age of 16 that Wharton was granted access to her father’s extensive library where she could only begin to satiate her intellectual curiosity. Ultimately, Wharton boldly broke through the restrictions to become one of America’s greatest writers, but the challenges continued. “Edith Wharton felt she had to be with men to have her intellectual equals,” noted Petty, who was quick to add, “Now, The Mount is bringing female writers together.” Undoubtedly a sight to behold more than a century after Wharton vacated the property.

Praise for Wharton’s path in life was the subject of much discussion. Jackson spoke to the fact that “being [at the Mount] humanizes [Wharton],” someone she had once considered a “forbidding figure.” She added, “[it] does not feel alienating to be here,”

citing that while “the milieu she wrote about was kind of intimidating...but to be here [is to] see her as a whole person, [whose] life was hard in lots of ways.” Wharton lived in Lenox between 1901 and 1911 in a house and grounds of her own design; she considered The Mount her first real home. Interestingly enough, those early passions for design and architecture – captured in “The Decoration of Houses” (1897) – were all but dismissed as vapid and unimportant. “The things that women do are [often] labeled frivolous,” said Jackson. “That’s just how it goes.” In retrospect, Wharton, who received acclaim for her words and language, was “clearly a visual person whose creativity cannot be divorced from her,” added Jackson, reiterating the importance of seeing an individual as a whole rather than made of disparate parts.



*Donna Lucey. Photo courtesy donnamlucey.com*

published or is forthcoming in Blackbird, the Los Angeles Review of Books, Ambit and Nat. Brut – has completed a children’s graphic novel, “Chasma Knights,” which will be available from First Second Books (Macmillan) in May 2018. Petty read a stand alone short story about the complexities of communication, in particular via email, in the modern day.

As the formal reading commenced, Lucey, a 2017 Edith Wharton Writer in Residence, pointed to introducing this year’s trio of talented women as a “miraculous opportunity.” Batuman, a staff writer at the New Yorker since 2010, is the author of “The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them.” She read from her first novel, “The Idiot,” which debuted in March 2017 to great critical praise and was recently included in the New York Times Critics’ Top Books of 2017.

Jackson, a book critic for the Boston Globe, is the award-winning author of the nonfiction books “The Inspirational Atheist: Wise Words on the Wonder and Meaning of Life,” “A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them,” “Shaking the Family Tree: Blue Blood, Black Sheep, and Other Obsessions of an Accidental Genealogist,” and the novel “Effie Perine.” She read an excerpt from her newest work, a historical novel still in process, about a young woman in the Netherlands during World War II who became a member of the resistance.

Petty – a fiction writer whose work has been published or is forthcoming in Blackbird, the Los Angeles Review of Books, Ambit and Nat. Brut – has completed a children’s graphic novel, “Chasma Knights,” which will be available from First Second Books (Macmillan) in May 2018. Petty read a stand alone short story about the complexities of communication, in particular via email, in the modern day.

“[The Mount] is but a token of the success and freedom and ambition” that Wharton secured in her own life, according to Batuman. And so exists an unspoken understanding that through hard work – whether daily word counts, blocks of time or to-do lists – with discrete goals and ambition, the opportunities are indeed endless. “[There is] more freedom and possibility now than what was [for women]” says Batuman. “[There are] possibilities for women writers not imagined [by the likes of Edith Wharton]” she added. “Com[ing] here [has] reminded [me] of the bigger context in which other books were written,” says Batuman of her residency.

The Mount is “well preserved, but a living place,” added Petty. “My relationship to Wharton, prior to this [residency], was as an English major,” she explained of examining Wharton’s texts in a new light. “To experience [Wharton] again at a new time of life, it is a privilege.”

*<https://theberkshireedge.com/three-women-writers-relish-residency-at-the-mount/>*