

Breaking Free

***Inconvenient Wife* challenges history**

By Margaret Bikman
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In *An Inconvenient Wife*, Lucy Carelton—the daughter and wife of wealthy men who insist she conform to the norms of 19th century New York, years to break free of the traditions that stifle her.

Q. How do you develop your characters in the context of the time?

As a historical novelist, it's important to me that my characters are people of their times. It's also true that people were the same fundamentally in the 19th century as they are now. The emotions and concerns in a 19th century diary are easy for any modern-day reader to grasp; it's the situations that are different.

Q. How do you make your characters seem true-to-life?

I pull a great deal of characterization from my research, but I also ask myself some basic questions about a character's goals and motivations. One of the most important is: What is this character's self-concept? What does he believe he's capable of? I think there's a point in everyone's life where you realize you're capable of something you didn't think you were. Sometimes that can be disturbing.

Q. What about the book's theme?

This book began with the idea that the suppression of a human soul is a dangerous thing. I constantly am intrigued by the ways society tries to restrict and control its members. We do it through culture, religion, fashion, entertainment and politics. I think that when society tries to put people in little, self-contained, labeled boxes, it can be very dangerous. I knew that for this book, I wanted to explore that theme in several different ways. Although I knew going into it what the twist of the story would be, I didn't really know how it would play out at the end.

Q. How did you conduct research for the novel?

The latter part of the 19th century is a gold mine for researchers. Laboratory science as we know it today began in this time period. People were losing their reliance on theology and searching for answers to moral and societal questions in science. They also were aware that the world was changing and of their own importance in documenting that change. They kept many diaries and journals in the spirit of sharing new and different experiences with their friends—even when, such as with Lucy, those experiences were asylum stays and incarceration.

Q. How did Lucy's character take shape in the time setting?

In (that) era, women not only were second-class citizens, they were also a scientific backwoods—a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder, a species thought to be so ruled by their reproductive systems that any exploration of creativity or intellectualism could only lead to disease, disorder and degenerate offspring. The fact that any woman had enough faith and self-confidence to break through those barriers is incredibly inspiring to me.

Q. What is your favorite word? What's your least favorite word?

My favorite word is "crisp." I love the onomatopoeia of it and that it can be applied so variously. I hate the word "atop." It's too precious; it lessens everything associated with it to a kind of cuteness.

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