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SonomaLife

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New historic novel on Jack London and wife explores their life together, possible affair

Charmian's Secrets

By **CHRISTIAN KALLEN**
SONOMA INDEX-TRIBUNE

Living in Sonoma Valley, we sometimes think we know all there is to know about Jack London — his life of adventure, his prodigious literary output, the fire that destroyed his dream Wolf House and his death at the age of 40 at Beauty Ranch, now Jack London State Historic Park.

But a newly released historical novel demonstrates there's a lot we don't know, not only about the writer's final years, but about his second wife, Charmian, their life together and even their controversial friendship with the 20th century's most famous magician, Harry Houdini.

"The Secret Life of Mrs. London" reveals all that and more — more than you knew, more than you bargained for.



Author and longtime Sonoma Valley resident Rebecca Rosenberg has spent years researching the story, not only at the state park's Cottage House, House of Happy Walls and of course the Wolf House; but at the Huntington Library in Pasadena, where Charmian London's diaries are kept.

"A lot of people have no idea about Jack London, and younger people may not have any idea who he was at all," says Rosenberg. "And certainly not Charmian."

Rosenberg brings to the story an empathy for Charmian, telling the story through her eyes — in first-person present tense, for an immediacy rarely found in historical fiction.

"I wanted to bring past history into the present," she said when reached by phone in

Southern California.

TURN TO SECRETS » PAGE D14

Charmian London, shown in 1910, was married to London from 1905 until his death in 1916. Above, Sonoma Valley resident Rebecca Rosenberg has written a new historical book about her, called "The Secret Life of Mrs. London."



SECRETS

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Rosenberg is staying with family in La Jolla because the Kenwood house she shared with her husband, Gary, was destroyed in the October fires, taking with it the acres of lavender plantings that had made the couple's Sonoma Lavender Farm a local tourist attraction. So much so that in June of 2016, the crowds forced a half-hour traffic jam along Highway 12 when the Rosenbergs posted on Facebook that the farm was open for free visits.

But the fires took it all away, just a month after she and her husband sold their company, Sonoma Lavender. They kept the house, and the lavender fields, all of which were destroyed by fire — which brings up two separate aspects about "The Secret Life of Mrs. London" that bear examination: social media and fires.

Rosenberg has proven an adept social media marketer, with posts throughout the month that help promote the book — from Jack London's birthday on Jan. 12 and Bessie Houdini's on Jan. 22 to spicy rumors that the young author was an oyster pirate, and the unpleasant fact that London was born out of wedlock, and his mother shot herself soon afterward.

That, and the postage stamps. Early in January, reviewers were sent copies of the book with its distinctive cover photo of a fur-wrapped femme fatale in a red hat — not exactly Charmian, but based on a photograph of her. And then there is the book itself, the packaging included a bookmark and a folded note card, all inside an envelope with six postage stamps, each bearing the same image of the book's cover. It was marketing on steroids.

The other commonality is fire, with which so many of us have become uncomfortably intimate. The still-mysterious fire that destroyed the Wolf House in 1914 when it was nearing completion figures in the book, and the mystery of its conflagration remains a mystery. Sort of. Was it arson or accident?

"Now, if you go to the park, they're going to tell you that it was the linseed and rags (catching fire by spontaneous combustion)," confides Rosenberg. "But there are plenty of experts that say, 'There's no way.'"

She lists some of the possibilities: Socialists angry at Jack London's lavish lifestyle; a disgruntled foreman. "Or it could have been Jack, pissed off, because they're building this dream house and (Charmian's) having affairs."

At least one of these theories is given some fuel in "The Se-



GARY ROSENBERG

Author and longtime Sonoma Valley resident Rebecca Rosenberg, who holds a wineglass at Beauty Ranch at Jack London State Historic Park in Glen Ellen, has written the new historical romance "The Secret Life of Mrs. London."



Charmian London, shown in 1910, was married to famed writer and adventurer Jack London.

cret Life of Mrs. London," but the book isn't really a mystery to solve, unless it's the dark secrets of the human heart — if those secrets can be solved at all.

The book is full of such whispers, not least of which is the affair that Charmian is thought to have had with Houdini following her husband's death, in November 1916. It's

that affair which gives the book its title, and doubtless its market punch.

But Rosenberg denies she just made it up. It was first uncovered, she notes, by Kenneth Silverman, a Houdini biographer. Among the evidence are telling traces in Charmian's own letters, which Rosenberg explored at the Huntington.

One of them, written when Charmian learns of Houdini's death, is poignant: "I scan his lovely profile texture with a magnifying glass. Sad over my magic lover dead."

"You know, just because I am portraying Charmian and the different feelings that she has doesn't mean that I think that that's a good idea to have affairs," Rosenberg makes haste to add. "But I was trying to point out what the issues were with her that may have led her to do that."

That's the writer's task, one which Rosenberg fulfills well. Though this is her first published novel, she and her husband also wrote "Lavender Fields of America" (lavender, it's no surprise, pops up in the London novel, though Rosenberg won't say it's subliminal cross-marketing). She's also in the middle of writing another novel, but thanks to a novel

SEE THE AUTHOR

"Secret Life of Mrs. London" author Rebecca Rosenberg will be appearing around Sonoma County.

March 8: Special appearance by magician Frank Balzerak, and Houdini-London nibbles by Worth Our Weight and visual presentation. 6:30 p.m., Copperfields Books Montgomery Village, 775 Village Court, Santa Rosa.

March 15: Special appearance by magician Frank Balzerak, Houdini-London nibbles by Worth Our Weight and visual presentation. 6:30 p.m., Readers Books, 130 E. Napa St., Sonoma.

March 17: Magician Frank Balzerak, Houdini-London nibbles by Worth Our Weight, visual presentation and book signing. 1-4 p.m., Breathless Winery, Healdsburg, 499 Moore Lane.

March 26: 7 p.m., Aquas Café, 189 H St., Petaluma.

writing certificate from Stanford's Continuing Studies program, she found the discipline to finish this one first, in just two years.

The initial wave of reviews has been positive, and Rosenberg has already scheduled a series of readings — at the

Copperfield's Books in Santa Rosa Thursday, Mar. 8, from 6:30-9:30 p.m., and Mar. 17 at Breathless Wines in Healdsburg, from 1-4 p.m. More events are planned as she and her husband return to Sonoma Valley, to oversee the rebuilding of their Kenwood home.

"We weren't even there when the fire happened," she says. "Then we came down here because it was just such a disaster."

The months they've spent in Southern California has given Rosenberg the chance to finish up her book and launch its social media campaign. Meanwhile she and Gary have overseen a series of plans for their house, which they plan to begin rebuilding in May.

The disaster, their distance and her immersion in Jack and Charmian London have given Rosenberg a sort of emotional distance even from her own accomplishments, and woes.

"Once you lose everything like that, like every single thing, you really do realize that it's all just stuff. It's stuff. We're alive and, this sounds corny but between you and me — you're alive, you're living."

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