

## NEW VOICES

Debut novelists Lorraine Bateman & Paul Cole, Peter James Cottrell, Genevieve Graham, Alex Grecian, Lois Leveen, and Taylor Polites provide insight into the inspiration for their novels.

**W**ar, intrigue, murder and unsung heroes and heroines provided starting points for this issue's debut novelists. Peter James Cottrell explains that his novel, *England's Janissary* (Robert Hale Ltd, 2012), was "a long time in the making, probably over twenty years when I think about it. I grew up with the Northern Irish Troubles in the background. They were just there. What I didn't realise was how complex they were and how deep their roots until I finally served there with the British Army. In the end, I spent over three years of my military career in Northern Ireland and fell in love with the place. I also fell in love with Irish history, despite its blurring of myth and reality, which is why I chose to write my MA History thesis on the role of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and ended up writing Irish history for Osprey Publishing. In 1919 republican leader Éamon de Valera called the RIC "England's Janissaries," which is where I got my title, dismissing them as mere mercenaries. Yet this is too simple an explanation as most were Irish Catholics who believed themselves Irish. Tragically they paid a heavy price for their loyalty to the Crown and, along with the 250,000 Irishmen who fought in the Great War, have been virtually airbrushed from Irish history. There are many books that tell the story of the Irish revolution through the eyes of the rebels, but none, as far as I know, from a policeman's perspective. That is why I made my protagonist an Irish Catholic ex-soldier turned policeman so that I could tell their story, and whilst Kevin Flynn is fictitious, most of the characters he meets and many of the events he gets caught up in happened. I wanted to tell the story of those men who, in the words of Irish writer Sean O'Faolain '...were not traitors. They had their loyalties, and stuck to them.'"

Researching the life of Edith Cavell, an English nurse executed by the Germans for espionage in Brussels in 1915, combined with her research for an MA in biography, resulted in Lorraine Bateman joining forces with Paul Cole to write *At Midnight in a Flaming Town* (Karnac Books, 2011). Bateman and Cole were "soon unearthing the most extraordinary accounts of bravery and adventure. The German invasion of Belgium meant that millions of innocent people suddenly found themselves under the yoke of occupation — and not just Belgians, there were

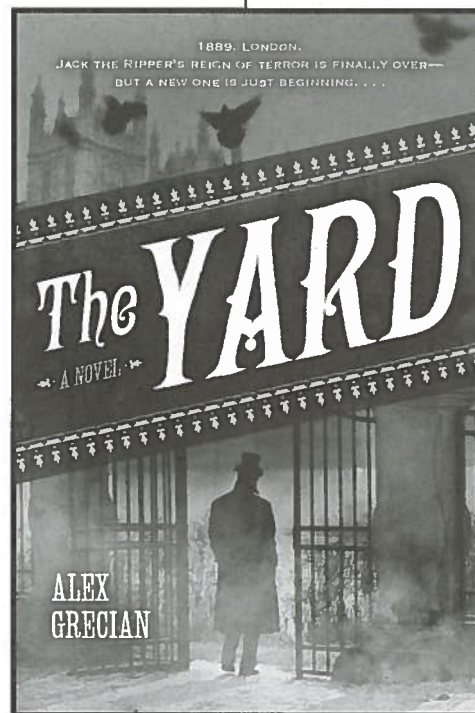
100,000 American tourists and travellers stranded in Europe ... Ordinary lives were turned upside down, and civilians were faced with situations and decisions that most of us would hope never to confront. British soldiers found themselves trapped behind enemy lines ... (this was before the war became bogged down by trench warfare, don't forget). Some of the truth had been lost in the propaganda haze of the period and we felt it was right to help put the record straight, as well as honour some little-known heroes and heroines. Furthermore, we just couldn't leave such gripping material untold."

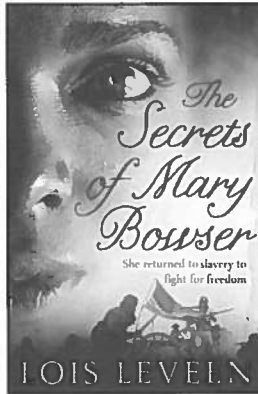
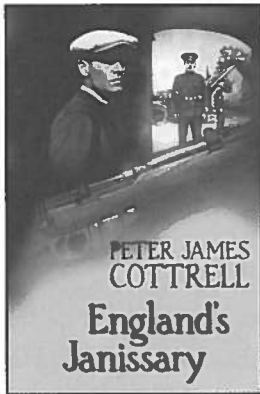
Lois Leveen was equally gripped by the fate of another real spy, Mary Bowser, a "former slave who became a spy." Leveen's novel, *The Secrets of Mary Bowser* (Hodder & Stoughton/Morrow, 2012), was inspired by "a few sentences describing her espionage while reading about a book of women's history. I couldn't stop wondering about what she did — and why she might have

chosen to do it. How did this particular person come to play such an amazing role in the American Civil War? What experiences would lead her to sacrifice her own freedom and return to slavery, when she could not be certain about how the war would end? What was it like to be an educated woman, but spend every day around people who consider you ignorant and not even human? What was the relationship between Bowser and Van Lew, two extraordinary women separated by race and class but united through their spying? I wrote *The Secrets of Mary Bowser* to answer those questions, for myself and for readers. Although there is very little documentation about Bowser's life, I did a huge amount of research on urban slavery in Richmond, Virginia, free black life in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and of course on the American Civil War. That was the biggest surprise, because the Civil War always seemed to be a

rather dull laundry list of names of generals and battlegrounds when I had to study it in school. Suddenly it became the backdrop for this fascinating story, about friendship and family and what happens when you choose to do what's right rather than what's easy. I loved interweaving real people and events, even actual correspondence and newspaper articles, with scenes and dialogue I invented. It is the perfect role for someone who loves both literature and history. Plus I got to create some secret codes, which is always pretty cool."

Genevieve Graham, author of *Under the Same Sky* (Berkley, 2012) admits that she "was never interested in history until recently. That interest sprang up along with the startling realization that I wanted to write a novel. When my children were little, I had no time for reading. As they grew more independent, so did I. My mother handed me Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander*, then insisted I sit down and read. I instantly became





Left to right from top: Lorraine Bateman & Paul Cole, Peter James Cottrell, Genevieve Graham, Alex Grecian, Lois Leveen, and Taylor Polites

an ardent admirer of Ms Gabaldon's many gifts and the 18th century she invited me to explore. But as with all good things, her novels came to an end. Even after I'd read them four times each, I experienced a kind of loneliness without those rough, difficult times, so I announced to my husband that I was off to write a book. Three hours later I presented him with a stack of paper which he informed me was 'not bad at all.'

Graham's husband's praise encouraged her to contact "re-enactors representing the time period, folks passionate about details," research, and take "volumes of notes." She discovered that "all those dull history lessons in school were based on thrilling worlds, worlds in which men hunted and fought — without cellphones." Graham prefers to call her novel "Historical Adventure, not Romance. Unlike many historical romances, my heroes and heroines often have never seen the inside of a ballroom, nor worried about salon etiquette. They are the rough and tough survivors, quick with a knife or a cheeky remark."

*The Rebel Wife* (Simon & Schuster, 2012) by Taylor Polites started with a love of "heroines in fiction — Scarlett O'Hara made a big impression when I was introduced to her at 13. *Gone with the Wind* spurred my fascination with the Civil War

era, in part because I grew up in Huntsville, Alabama, a town with a beautifully preserved antebellum district that feels like time-travel. I read a lot about the period, but in college, I began a more focused study of the Civil War South. By then, major revisions had been made to the received historical view of Reconstruction, inherited from the Dunning School, which portrayed the South as the victim of corrupt carpetbaggers and incompetent freedmen."

For Polites, "reading this new scholarship was an important correction for me. I had seen very few works of fiction based on Reconstruction, which, the more I read, had as much to do with our country today as the Civil War. The Union had an immense amount of moral and political power behind it after the Civil War and that capital was used to enact an incredible program of political equality (for men only, however). The reaction to that experiment was violent and, after the Panic of 1873, the capital was all spent. The Union reconciled through national acceptance of a race-based, segregationist society that was manifested in economics and civil life, politics, the judiciary, literature and popular culture. Gains had been made, however, and while there was a severe retrenchment, the stage was set for new progress in later generations. The end of Reconstruction as a turning point began to fascinate me. How about a new Southern heroine, a woman of her time with the same prejudices and assumptions about her Southern world, but someone who overcomes them at this critical juncture in the story of the Civil War, its aftermath, and what it meant for American society?"

Author Alex Grecian has long been associated with graphic novels, but his first historical fiction novel, *The Yard* (Putman, 2012) is set at Scotland Yard in 1889, and is full of colour and melodrama. Grecian explains: "Every story is about crime, if you look hard enough. We humans have found countless ways to hurt each other. We're creative about it...Crime's been around as long as we humans have. I suppose, if I wanted to, I could write a crime novel about cavemen or the Renaissance. But I like the Victorian era best. That's when we rolled up our collective sleeves and got busy walling each other up in the cellar." For Grecian, during the Victorian era, "magic and science coexisted for a while. They were equals. But there was no such thing as DNA ...Nobody cared about fingerprints and we never had to wear uncomfortable latex gloves. If we kept a straight face ... we could get away with murder." ❖

MYFANWY COOK is fascinated by the creativity of debut novelists in unearthing settings, plots, and characters to captivate readers of historical fiction. If you have information about a debut novelist of interest to feature, please email ([myfanwyc@btinternet.com](mailto:myfanwyc@btinternet.com)) or tweet her ([twitter.com/MyfanwyCook](https://twitter.com/MyfanwyCook)).

