

BEHIND THE PAGES: The Wharton Plot

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No one writes historical mystery like Mariah Fredericks. Long known for her Jane Prescott series, Mariah's stand-alone *The Lindbergh Nanny* took the publishing world by storm—and her follow-up stand-alone *The Wharton Plot* is making an even bigger splash. Inspired by a true story, this mesmerizing novel follows renowned novelist Edith Wharton in the twilight years of the Gilded Age in New York as she tracks a killer, earning kudos from *Oprah Daily*, *Book Bub*, and *Library Journal*, and more. In this exclusive BEHIND THE PAGES interview, Mariah talks about how and why she came to write this fascinating pageturner.

1. What's the title of your book—and was that always the title?

It's called *The Wharton Plot*, and no, that was not always the title. In my computer, various drafts are called "EW novel" or some form of Edith—Edith old, Edith new, Edith revised, Edith back up. For a time, it was called *The Age of Guilt*, a play on *The Age of Innocence*, which was clever, but sounded like nonfiction. I tried *Mrs. Wharton and the Aggravating Author*, but that suggested a series. Also, too long. Finally, we came to *The Wharton Plot*.

2. Who's the main character of your book—and was that always their name?

The main character of my book is Mrs. Edith Wharton, formerly Edith Jones. Author of *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, and *The Age of Innocence*, for which she became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize. (It was a controversial choice. The jury originally chose *Main Street*, but the decision overturned because the book was judged unwholesome. Wharton was appalled. When Sinclair Lewis wrote her a classy note of congratulations, she wrote back, “When I discovered that I was being rewarded for uplifting American morals, I confess I did despair. Subsequently, when I found the prize [should] really have been yours, but was withdrawn because your book (I quote from memory) had ‘offended a number of prominent persons in the Middle West,’ disgust was added to despair.”)

3. At the start of the book, what’s the character’s goal?

To write the book she wants to and to escape her husband. The book is based on a true episode in Wharton’s life: a few weeks she spent stranded at the Belmont Hotel, awaiting her husband’s doctor so he could approve a world tour for Teddy, who was mentally ill. (Travel and separation from Edith were considered beneficial.) But the doctor was delayed by flu, so she was stuck in New York. In *The Wharton Plot*, she finds distraction by searching for the murderer of David Graham Phillips.

4. What was the core idea for this novel—a plot point? a theme?—and where did it come from?

Author David Graham Phillips was shot near Gramercy Park in 1911, as he was heading to the Princeton Club which had been Stanford White’s home. He was a combative, progressive writer; as a journalist, he wrote a series of articles called *The Treason of the Senate*, in which he accused senators of being the lackeys of wealthy interests, such as the Vanderbilts. Teddy Roosevelt called him “the man who rakes the muck”—coining the term muckraker. His novels were, to put it bluntly, often about women and sex, the transactional nature of relationships. There’s always been something about his murder that felt emblematic of the end of the Gilded Age in New York. As the premier chronicler of that world, who was in 1911 on the cusp of huge life changes herself, Edith Wharton seemed the perfect person to grapple with the life and death of David Graham Phillips.

5. At what point did you come up with the final version of the first line?

The first line is “Brownell paused in apprehension.” It’s a play on the first line of *The House of Mirth*, “Selden paused in surprise.” Both men are in or near Grand Central Station—a point of departure and arrival—and they’re both looking at the heroines of the story: Lily Bart and Edith Wharton. So that line has stayed as it was. Originally, I had a prologue from Edith’s point of view. But she’s making a point when she introduces her heroine through someone else’s eyes, and I thought that point was worth making, so I scrapped the prologue. Also, my editor told me to.

6. Did you know the ending of the book when you started?

I knew who had done it and I knew how I wanted Edith’s journey to end. But the meaning of the murder, its theme, and what it reveals to Edith about her own life—that I didn’t know until I had finished the book.

7. What’s something in this book that you’ve never done before?

Write in third person. For 15 books, I’ve done first person, because I like the energy and intimacy of that voice. But Wharton’s first-person voice is known to us through her letters, which would turn this into an epistolary novel, which...it shouldn’t be. I also wanted it to have the feel of a Wharton novel, and she wrote third person. It was a real challenge, but I found the world building much easier, because you have much more license to describe physical surroundings than you do when you’re filtering through someone’s immediate impressions.

8. What part of your tour (or launch week) are you most excited about?

Two things: I get to go to Charter Books in Newport, so of course I'll be visiting Edith's house, Land's End, the Breakers, and just generally soaking up the Gilded Age vibe. Then for the New York launch, I'll be talking with Anna Quindlen at P&T Knitwear. In addition to being an incredible writer and a superb interviewer, she's a big Wharton fan. So that should be a lot of fun.

9. Who in your #writing community deserves a special shout-out for supporting you in writing this story?

I have incredible and very patient friends. For *The Wharton Plot*, I'm deeply thankful to Carol Goodman. In addition to being one of the best mystery writers working today, she's also a professor who's worked with these books in an academic setting and she's insanely knowledgeable. Early on, I turned to her to discuss the craziness of attempting Edith Wharton as a character. I checked in with her at various stages to make sure I was covering the events and themes of Wharton's life correctly. She asked questions, suggested reading. She held my hand on this one and I'm really grateful.

10. How do you want readers to feel when they close the book?

That they want to read Edith Wharton, of course! But this is also a book about confronting middle age. Wharton was feeling somewhat despairing as she reached 50. She needed to change things, make some hard choices. But she did, going on to write three of her greatest novels, serve in the French war effort, and maintain many vital friendships. I want the reader to feel that bold new beginnings are possible at any age.

11. What did *you* learn from this book?

That I could write in third person and that I could write about sex. I used the word "rutting" for the first time in a novel. It's a whole new world!



Mariah Fredericks was born, raised, and still lives in New York City. She graduated from Vassar College with a degree in history. She is the author of the Jane Prescott mystery series, which has twice been nominated for the Mary Higgins Clark Award.

Her historical standalone, *The Lindbergh Nanny*, was nominated for the 2023 Anthony and Agatha, as well as the Macavity Sue Feder Memorial Award. Her latest novel, *The Wharton Plot*, released on January 23, 2024.