

Ashley Sweeney Author Letter to Book Clubs

The seed for *Eliza Waite* came to me after a hike through the dense woods of largely uninhabited Cypress Island in Washington's San Juan Islands in the fall of 2008. On the cross-island hike, my husband Michael and I came across an abandoned cabin perched steeply above the beachfront at Smuggler's Cove on the island's remote north side.

We were curious, and poked in and around the cabin. The small rustic building sat in sad disrepair, missing its door and windows, and sporting a sagging roof and mouse droppings throughout. It was evident that no one had lived there for a very, very long time.

But who had lived here? And what was his or her story?

Near the cabin, we found a plaque that tells the tale of a Mrs. Zoe Hardy, who lived alone at Smuggler's Cove in the 1930s. A recluse, Mrs. Hardy built her cabin, farmed the area, and eschewed strangers. She died mysteriously after an illness and her body was never found.

As we moored that night just off Smuggler's Cove on our 28' Cape Dory, my husband and I talked late into the night about the possibility of crafting a novel based on a fictional woman who might have lived at this locale.

Notes from that long ago night include a worksheet I use when first thinking about a piece or when I teach students about setting. It includes thinking about location, first impressions, five senses, community, weather, and natural history, among other topics.

The setting was rife with possibility!

Because I was still working full time as a GED instructor for the nearby Nooksack Indian Tribe, I mulled the idea around for two years. In the fall of 2010, I took a master class with Jane Hamilton at Hedgebrook and there the kernel of the novel popped. Living at Owl Cottage, I spent seven amazing days making a character collage, listening to haunting music, eating sparsely (except for dinners at the amazing Hedgebrook kitchen table), and writing ferociously.

There I was, a woman, living in a small cabin on my own. I tended a wood fire, drank tea, and concentrated on my thoughts. Just like Eliza! In the deep cedar woods of Whidbey Island, Washington, Eliza Waite became real to me.

Eliza Waite recounts the story of a disenfranchised woman who finds her way in the world, first as a preacher's wife in Washington, and then as a successful business owner and enlightened woman in Skagway, Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898.

I derived much pleasure researching for the novel, and spent time in Alaska to conduct interviews and pore over archival media: books, photos, essays, magazines, diaries, and cookbooks from the late 1800s.

For those of us who write historical fiction, errors can be deadly. In writing *Eliza Waite*, I was constantly fact-checking myself.

Did matchsticks exist in the late 19th century?

Who was president of the U.S. in 1890s?

What was the major source of news in the San Juan Islands and Skagway, Alaska at the turn of the last century?

Where did women go for female hysteria treatments?

When was *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* published?

Why did tens of thousands of men and women drop out of their lives to search for elusive gold in the Klondike?

And how did women cook and bake without any modern conveniences?

As Eliza is a baker first as avocation and later as vocation, I felt the need to bake and taste all the authentic pioneer recipes included in the novel. Much hilarity ensued as members of my book club, neighbors, family, and friends tried to replicate pioneer recipes in modern kitchens. But the results turned out surprisingly tasty, and I invite readers to try these recipes for themselves.

Michael and I return often to Smuggler's Cove on *Evening Star*. As we're lulled to sleep by the constant waves, it's not hard to imagine Eliza there in the late 1890s, falling asleep under the wide saucer of stars with the constant *lap, lap, lap* of the waves as her only company.