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BOOK INFORMATION

PRESS RELEASE

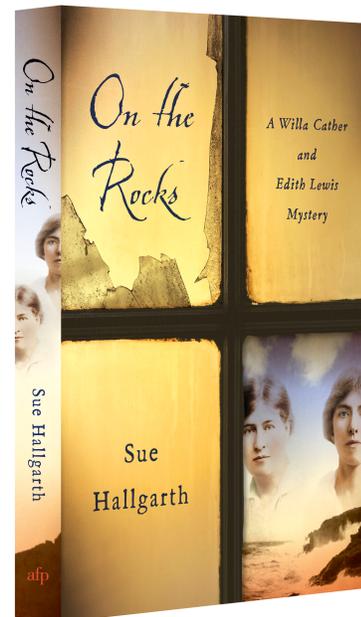
PRAISE FOR *ON THE ROCKS*

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Book Information

On the Rocks

by Sue Hallgarth

On sale January 15, 2013

\$15.95 paper

\$9.99 ebook

262 pages

ISBN: 978-0-9855200-0-7

Arbor Farm Press

On the Rocks is the first in a smart new literary mystery series featuring Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist Willa Cather and her talented life partner Edith Lewis.

Arbor Farm Press is a discerning, independent publisher founded in 2012 committed to publishing unique works of literature and nonfiction—with special emphasis on the design and production of beautiful books in print and/or digital editions.

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

On the Rocks

A Willa Cather and Edith Lewis Mystery

by Sue Hallgarth

“Sue Hallgarth incorporates the spectacular setting of Grand Manan into a mystery set among summer colonies of feminist artists, colorful island types, and suspicious visitors. Cather readers will detect her pronouncements on writing and life, and the island rock itself, a Cather symbol of survival, becomes her a solid contrast to the human foibles that play out on the surface.” —**John Murphy**, member of Board of Governors, The Willa Cather Foundation

The year is 1929 and Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist Willa Cather and her partner Edith Lewis are summering on Grand Manan, an island in the Bay of Fundy. In their cottage’s sparsely furnished attic room, Cather is at work writing *Shadows on the Rock*, her tenth novel. Edith is painting watercolors from the cliffs two hundred feet above the rising tides of Whale Cove. Out of the corner of her eye, Edith sees a body plunge from the edge of the cliff to the rocks below...Solving the mystery, first time novelist Sue Hallgarth’s intimate view of village politics and the goings-on of two women’s communities long lost to history is also a suspenseful and surprising crime novel. Hallgarth draws the reader into a unique retreat and an inside glimpse of the lives of a great American novelist and her talented life partner.

“Utterly absorbing, compulsively readable. Hallgarth spins her tale with an artistry that allows us to imagine a time and place as compelling as a dream.”

—**Kathleen Hill**, author of *Who Occupies This House* and *Still Waters in Niger*

“Cather aficionados will be especially interested in the author’s take on Willa Cather’s personal history. The amiable cottage colony on Grand Manan is lovingly captured in this first book in a sparkling new literary mystery series.”

—**Nancy Rutland**, founder of *Bookworks* bookstore, Albuquerque, NM

Sue Hallgarth is a former English professor. She has written scholarly articles on Willa Cather and Edith Lewis. This is her first book of fiction and the first in a series of adventures with Willa and Edith.

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Praise for the Book

One of the top ten *Titles to Pick Up Now* recommended in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, February 2013

“...Cather fans will enjoy the atmosphere, and Hallgarth captures the local color well, providing a look at the eccentric island residents, the small-town politics, and the life of the [two] women’s communities.”

—**American Library Association Booklist**, 2/1/2013

“Cather aficionados will be especially interested in the author’s take on Willa Cather’s personal history. The amiable cottage colony on Grand Manan is lovingly captured . . . in a sparkling new literary mystery series.”

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Albuquerque Journal's David Steinberg shouts out Sue Hallgarth's "Debut Mystery," 1/12/13

“...the strength of the book is in Hallgarth's ability to paint a scene. Her research about Grand Manan, Cather & Lewis, and the time period are obviously top notch.”

—**WildmooBooks**

“Utterly absorbing, compulsively readable. Hallgarth spins her tale with an artistry that allows us to imagine a time and place as compelling as a dream.”

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“*On the Rocks* is sophisticated and yet has a wonderful innocence. It conveys a convincing sense of the period. The characters are rounded, real. It is funny. It is compelling. It is a good tale.”

—**Jake Page**, author of the Mo Bowdre mystery series

"I enjoyed the fun and energy of *On the Rocks*!"

—**Lucia Woods Lindley**, member of Board of Governors, The Willa Cather Foundation

Author Bio

Sue is a novelist and Willa Cather and Edith Lewis scholar. A former faculty member and administrator at Empire State College (State University of New York) and William Woods University, she held a fellowship (1994-1996) from the American Council of Learned Societies to work on a biography of Willa Cather, and she was a visiting fellow at Princeton University and Rutgers University. From 1987-1996 she also served as a writing consultant and editor for the National Council for Research on Women.

A workforce development expert, she also co-created and ran her own successful New Mexico-based company, Employment Training Services (ETS) from 1998-2004, a multipurpose small corporation that provided trainings and placement for Levi Strauss & Co., the New Mexico Department of Labor, Associated Contractors of New Mexico, and the New Mexico Department of Transportation. Prior to starting ETS, she served as consultant to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), working with clients like JP Morgan/Chase Manhattan Bank and Levi Strauss providing educational and career counseling services.

She lives in Corrales New Mexico with her partner of 25 years, two horses, a miniature donkey, two goats, eight chickens, and four dogs. *On the Rocks* is her first published novel.

Author Interview

Arbor Farm Press is publishing Sue's first novel and recently conducted an interview with her:

AFP: What prompted you to write this novel?

SH: It began with an image, a visual image of a body dropping from a cliff. I have no idea why that image came to mind, but when it did I was curious enough to spend time considering what it would be like to see the actual event, what caused it, what would happen next, who might see it, what would happen then. When it occurred to me that the cliff could be on Grand Manan and Willa Cather's partner Edith Lewis the viewer, I was off and writing. I remember John Fowles saying he too had a visual image—of a woman standing alone at the end of pier—that became the genesis for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. We both, it seems, also like doing research and working with historical figures and the mysterious.

AFP: In writing about Willa Cather, why choose mystery rather than historical fiction?

SH: A mystery provides its own forward motion. It doesn't have to be linear or chronological the way historical fiction does, it just has to be logical. And it allows for all sorts of apparently extraneous happenings and characters and scenes that somehow finally fit together, so rather than focusing on a single character or place, a writer can go off willy-nilly and invite a whole village to participate. It's great fun. Why not a mystery?

AFP: Some people might call *On the Rocks* a "cozy mystery." Do you?

SH: Yes and no. I was interested in creating a comfortable sense of time and place, in this case of a quiet island retreat in the 1920s where bad things happen but off stage. Whether by Agatha Christie or Amanda Cross, cozies are generally pleasant, interesting, and often short. Sometimes a character changes in the course of the story, more often in cozies our view changes, whether of character or situation or both. That description suits *On the Rocks* well enough, but I also wanted to develop characters and a storyline that provide more than a "light" read. Because I based the main characters on real people in a real place at a specific time history, readers discover Willa Cather in her world and get to know Edith Lewis, her partner of more than forty years.

AFP: Where did Constable Daggett come from? And other characters not based on real people?

SH: I wish I knew. They just came, jumped from nowhere onto the page. I'm sure they contain smidgens of people and characters I've known from life and fiction, for Daggett a bit of Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse, perhaps; for Little John, any number of characters from Dickens or Thackeray or the fellow I wrote a dissertation on, Robert Smith Surtees; for Rob Feeney, fellows I've known. But when and where they jumped from the inner workings of my—what to call it? subconscious?—they did so because the story needed them: a steady, gentle fellow who could figure things out, a comic diversion to change the pace and emphasize a point, a reflective character to store and reveal information. Once they appeared, I only had imaginatively to move inside them to know what they would say or do and what should come next. It was great fun getting to know them and following as they found their ways through the labyrinth. That is, by the way, how I created the plot. I did have general notions from the outset but none of the twists and turns. Amazing what characters can do.

AFP: Why did you choose to set *On the Rocks* on Grand Manan?

SH: Well, for one thing, I began with the vision of a person dropping off a cliff. For another, I spent parts of four summers on the island and loved every inch of it. With only five fishing villages, it's small, manageable, and remote. It's a great place for hiking, for birding, for breezes carrying pungent sea air, for whales and dolphins playing in the clearest of blue-green waters, for carrying home loaves and scones from the French bakery, for logs crackling in the tiny cod stove or fireplace to chase away the chill of damp, foggy mornings, for watching fishermen work their nets. And for another, Willa Cather and Edith Lewis loved it too, so much so they built their own cottage and spent twenty summers at Whale Cove. In *On the Rocks*, the island serves as a microcosm, a quiet backwater filled with diverse individuals and bristling with major issues of the time, a perfect setting for a mystery.

AFP: How do you write? And how did you stay with something as long as this book took to write?

SH: Over two decades, you mean? Clearly, I must not be the kind of writer who puts herself in a chair everyday for x amount of hours. Writing a book, any book, takes commitment and discipline. One has to really like the subject to stay with it, however long it takes. The truth is I do have commitment and discipline, and I am still intrigued by Cather and Lewis, such interesting women, so much still to be learned about their lives. The actual writing of *On the Rocks* took about a year, the revisions another several months. When I'm writing I do put myself in a chair, usually for three to four hours and then stop to clear my head for the next day. And I have learned to stop before I'm done, often in mid-sentence, so I have a place ready to start the next day or the next week. The reason this book took so long has nothing to do with my work habits but with the fact that life and the need to earn a living intervened. I simply discontinued my research and set the manuscript aside. For years. Then great bouts of procrastination and self-doubt took over. That I did find a way to put myself back in my chair for x amount of hours testifies to Cather's and Lewis' lasting fascination and the importance I feel for having others know more about them.

AFP: I understand that you were doing research for a biography on Willa Cather. Why Cather and why did you shift to fiction?

SH: The odd thing is I first planned to write a critical study of Cather's fiction. Her books interested me I suppose in part because I grew up in the middle of this country and her settings and characters resonated with the places and people I knew. They were great but deceptively simple and, I thought, deserving of more and more serious literary analysis than they had yet received. I first shifted to biography when I realized that the Cather I knew was so different from the accepted view that I would have to explain her before I could discuss her work. The predominant view then (less so now) was that Cather was childlike, a tomboy who suddenly became a writer so devoted to art that she had no life: she had only a past, a childhood she rendered nostalgically in her novels until, disillusioned, she became a melancholic recluse. The Cather I knew did neither. She might draw on the past for some of her novels, but she was a sophisticated New Yorker and world traveler, conversant with the great ideas and people of her time, a professional who knew her art and her audience. Her novels are complex. The most difficult, *The Professor's House*, for instance, or *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, are steeped in irony and layered with meaning. Her life was as complex and vibrant as her novels. And fiction, I decided, was the best way to reveal the richness, the complexity, and the joy in her life and in the lives of those around her.

Reading Guide Questions

1. How much did you know about Willa Cather before you read *On the Rocks*? What do you know about her life? About the lives she created in her fiction? How would you guess they might be similar? Different?
2. Did this novel help you know more about Willa Cather? Edith Lewis? About the world they lived in? What kinds of details did you pick up?
3. Many readers are interested in how writers and artists develop their talents. Does it surprise you to learn that Willa Cather was first a journalist and later managing editor of a popular, muckraking magazine in New York City before she shifted to writing fiction full time? How does that inform your understanding of her as a writer?
4. Have you thought much about how “independent women” spend their time? Were you surprised to learn about women’s summer colonies? In what ways do you think such colonies might be important? Is there anything similar to them now?
5. Writers often need privacy and quiet in which to work. Willa Cather found privacy and quiet on Grand Manan. She would also spend a few months writing at a resort hotel in Jaffrey Center, NH after returning to the mainland each fall. Do you know of other writers who have found ‘retreats’ in which to work? Who and where?
6. Were you surprised at the attitudes of the islanders toward independent women in the 1920s? How accurate do you think that depiction might be? How have attitudes changed since the 1920s? Stayed the same?
7. Willa Cather once said, “the world broke in two” in 1922. Why do you suppose she chose that year and what do you think she might have meant?
8. Some have said that Prohibition encouraged crime. What do you know about Prohibition? About bootleggers and speakeasies? About men like Al Capone? When and why was Prohibition repealed? Are there any parallels in today’s world?

On the Rocks

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A Willa Cather
and
Edith Lewis
Mystery



Sue Hallgarth

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