

Alice Fulton explores family-based fiction in 'Nightingales of Troy'

BY DANIEL ALOI

For her first work of fiction, poet and Cornell professor of English Alice Fulton had to look no further for inspiration than her own Irish Catholic family and her hometown of Troy, N.Y.



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Fulton's Aunt Madeline at her high school graduation circa 1923.



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The Phoenix Hotel, owned by Fulton's father in Lansingburgh, N.Y., early 1940s, is a setting Fulton used in "The Nightingales of Troy."

"The Nightingales of Troy: Stories of One Family's Century," published in July by W.W. Norton, has earned praise from the Irish Times, the Boston Globe and fellow faculty novelists Alison Lurie and Robert Morgan, among others. Fulton's poetic command of language is evident in the book, rich with vernacular passages: "That fall was damp as a gravedigger's skin ... Before the winter zeros struck, I thought I'd better mend my lacy lung with Sister's remedy."

Fulton began writing the collection of short stories before she came to Cornell in 2000.

"It took me too long because I was writing other books [poetry and an essay collection] at the same time, which I don't think is a good idea," she said. "I started some short stories to see how I liked it. I wrote one, then another, and thought this probably could be a collection."

With story threads and characters appearing throughout, the book "is a novel in stories," Fulton said. "The characters are all present in the first story, and then readers see them at different points in their lives."

Intrigued with finding out more about her great-grandmother, she sought out an obituary in the Troy public library. "It was a long narrative, and I discovered a secret in her life that had never been mentioned in the family, a mystery really," she said. "I then tried to imagine how this sad event came to be."

That became the first story she wrote, "Queen Wintergreen," set in 1918. It was fiction by necessity, spun from source material short on facts.

"I never knew my great-grandmother, so I had to completely make up the character," Fulton said. "No one had any memories of her in the family. Fiction can start with an intriguing fragment or a fact, a secret or mystery, and work backward from it. It was interesting to create the milieu of 1918.

I then thought of writing one story in each decade of a family based on my mother and her sisters."

"The Glorious Mysteries," written next and set in the 1950s, had

"characters based on my two great aunts, who I knew a little. They worked in the collar factories in Troy. In the story there are three sisters who live together, very eccentric people, and their niece gets caught in the middle of their wrangling."

Writing them out of chronological order, Fulton based each story on an interesting character "whose life was in turmoil or at a point of change. I focused on the character who'd had the most upsetting experience in a particular decade."

Fulton's teenage passions included poetry and pop music – Emily Dickinson and The Beatles. This comes out in the 1960s story "The Real Eleanor Rigby," in which Ruth Livingston and her mother meet The Beatles. As a college radio DJ in the 1970s, Fulton met John Lennon and George Harrison. Also like Ruth, Fulton had eclectic

tastes far beyond those of her Catholic-school peers.

"I think the story is about loneliness, and knowing people who are famous better than we know people we see every day," she said.

Fulton said she's never attended a fiction workshop; she learned from writers she'd read and enjoyed.

"I tell students, 'Try to write the kind of book you love to read.'"

During the writing, she discovered she needed to focus on narrative tension. "What was very hard was making something happen," she said. "There has to be conflict. There's a great saying I learned from the writer Janet Burroway: 'A story is a war.' A poem certainly isn't a war."

Fulton will read from and sign copies of the book Sept. 6 at 2 p.m. at Bookery II in downtown Ithaca and Oct. 17 at the Cornell Store.



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Fulton's aunts and mother at Lake George in the 1930s.