Johnstown flood inspires suspenseful novel about twins separated by the deluge

PITTSBURGH—The 125th anniversary of the devastating Johnstown, Pennsylvania, flood will be observed on May 31, 2014. Thousands perished in what was the worst natural disaster in U.S. history at the time. The University of Pittsburgh Press has just published a compelling novel that underscores how the deluge changed the lives of those fortunate enough to survive it: The Johnstown Girls, by Johnstown native and acclaimed mystery writer Kathleen George.

George’s fictional tale, grounded in history, focuses on Ellen Emerson, who may be the last living survivor of the flood. She was only four years old on May 31, 1889, when twenty million tons of water decimated her hometown.

A century later, newspaper reporters Ben Bragdon and Nina Collins set out to interview 103-year-old Ellen for Ben’s feature article on the flood. When asked the secret to her longevity, Ellen simply attributes it to “restlessness.” As we see, that restlessness is fueled by Ellen’s innate belief that her twin sister Mary, who went missing in the flood, is somehow still alive. Her story intrigues Ben, but it haunts Nina, who is determined to help Ellen find her missing half.

George masterfully blends a history of the Johnstown Flood into her heartrending tale of twins who have never known the truth about that fateful day so long ago—a day that would send their lives hurtling down different paths.

“The Johnstown Flood is a huge story—the American people were aghast at the loss of life and the wholesale destruction of this industrial city,” said Richard Burkert, president of the Johnstown Flood Museum. “The personal stories of this epic tragedy were often overshadowed by the sheer magnitude of the event. Kathleen George succeeds wonderfully in portraying the ways in which a shattering event can rearrange the fate of individual lives. She knows and loves southwestern Pennsylvania and its people. As with her mysteries, The Johnstown Girls strongly evokes the people and way of life of the region.”

George is the author of seven mysteries set in Pittsburgh: A Measure of Blood; Simple; The Odds, which was nominated for the Edgar® Award by the Mystery Writers of America; Hideout; Afterimage; Fallen; and Taken. She is also the author of the short story collection The Man in the Buick and editor of another collection, Pittsburgh Noir. George is a professor of theater arts and creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh and has published several books on theater, including Rhythm in Drama, and, most recently, Winter’s Tales: Reflections on the Novelistic Stage.

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The Johnstown Girls by Kathleen George is published by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

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