

## NEW VOICES

**Legends are refreshed and new historical insights expressed by debut novelists Marc Graham, Linnea Hartsuyker, Jess Kidd, and Crystal King.**

**T**he *Half-Drowned King* (Harper US/Little, Brown UK, Aug. 2017) by Linnea Hartsuyker, and its forthcoming sequels, have their origins in legend and the author's own family history. When she was in her late teens, she says, "One of my relatives decided to trace our Scandinavian ancestry and identified all of our relatives back to Alma, five generations ago in Sweden. Scandinavian church records are nearly unbroken back to the coming of Christianity in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and beyond that, the sagas record ancestry back to the loins of gods and giants. We found that one branch of my family descends from Harald Fairhair, the first king of Norway in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

"I was fascinated by this connection, and when I went to college, I researched Harald in Cornell's libraries, reading *The Heimskringla*, the Saga of Norwegian Kings written by Snorri Sturlusson, when I was supposed to be doing my engineering homework. I learned about Princess Gyda, who proclaimed that she would only marry Harald if he conquered all of Norway, so he swore he would not cut his hair or shave his beard until he had done so, and fifteen years later, he returned and married her.

"When I read the sagas again in my late twenties," she continues, "this time as an aspiring writer, I found that Harald's story is not a very compelling narrative to build a novel around. Harald is the brightest and the best, and he always wins. The people who surround him, torn between duty and their own desires, have far more engaging stories. At Harald's side, I found Ragnvald of Maer, his right-hand man, who makes hard sacrifices because of his loyalty to his king. The sagas provide a bare-bones account of Ragnvald's involvement in Harald's conquest, leaving plenty of room for invention. And he had a sister, Svanhild, about whom even less is known."

Hartsuyker believes, she says, that "the dawn of the Scandinavian kingdoms was a fascinating time when some longed for a powerful king to protect them, and others clung to the freedom of smaller, independent territories. In *The Half-Drowned King*, Ragnvald and Svanhild embody two sides of that

conflict in a tale of betrayal and hard choices, of families ripped apart, and brought back together again."

Marc Graham, author of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American saga *Of Ashes and Dust* (Five Star, Apr. 2017) has, like Hartsuyker, been a storyteller for most of his life. "Beginning with wretched sci-fi in my early years, and moving on to mediocre bits of thriller in my college years. I'd mostly abandoned the notion of becoming a writer until, in 1998, I was living in Richmond, Virginia. A friend was studying to become a regression hypnotherapist and required a certain number of test cases. I'm an engineer by profession, but found the idea intriguing. One hour on the therapist's sofa radically changed the course of my life.

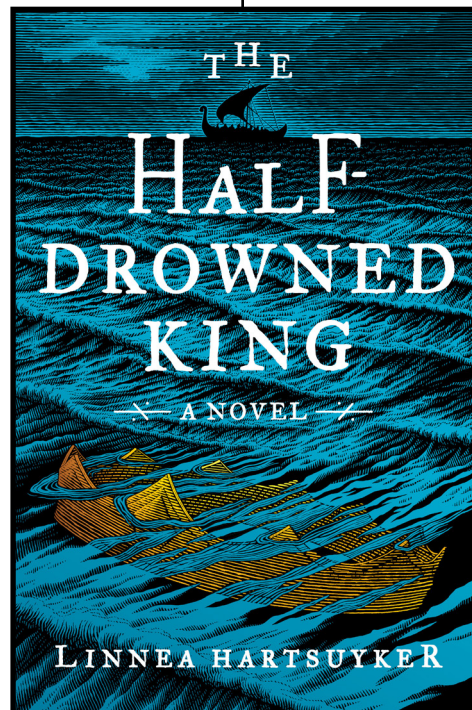
"The session began by entering a state of relaxation. I was then invited to enter into a handful of life events, identify myself and my surroundings, and relate my experiences. It was there that I met Jim Robbins and learned about his life."

Graham explains: "While the session involved only four scenes of Robbins's life and death, these formed the core of what was to become *Of Ashes and Dust*. The Muse had grabbed me and, though I blundered through the first few years of dabbling in writing, she was relentless in birthing the story through me.

"I cannot say with certainty if the bits of story I witnessed were the result of past-life memories or of a deeply relaxed and creative state. I've found no trace of Jim Robbins in the historical record. However, there have been too

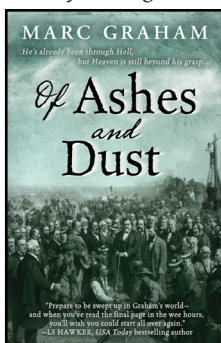
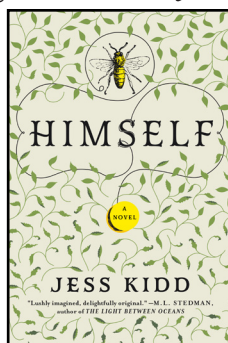
many instances of synchronicity for me to discount the whole thing. When, as the writer, I needed a certain event or place or character, a little research brought forth just the thing on multiple occasions. I'm not necessarily advocating regression hypnosis as a tool for the creative process, but I would encourage all writers to be open to inspiration and mindful of the Muse. One never knows when, where, or how she may pounce."

The inspiration for Crystal King's novel *Feast of Sorrow* (Touchstone, April 2017) is a clear example of a creative mind that is open to the unexpected. She is a culinary enthusiast and has "always been drawn to books about food, both non-fiction and fiction," she says. "In fact, I was reading *Feast: A History of Grand Eating* by historian Roy Strong when I found the seed of inspiration for *Feast of Sorrow*. At the time, I was working on a contemporary novel about a celebrity chef who had a fantastical set of knives that fueled his cooking. I needed an origin story for the knives, and in *Feast* there was a paragraph about the ancient Roman gourmand, Apicius, and the dramatic way in which he





Left to right: Linnea Hartsuyker, Marc Graham, Jess Kidd & Crystal King



had died."

King elucidates: "I was struck by the strangeness of the tale, decided it made the perfect origin story for the fantastical knives, and set to work writing the scene. However, I quickly realized that the story of Apicius was far more compelling than the story I was writing. I scrapped that book and embarked upon heavy research about ancient Rome. I even began learning Italian and took numerous trips to Italy so that I could walk in the footsteps of my characters."

From the outset of her creative process, she says, "Food was central to the story of *Feast of Sorrow*. Much of the tale unfolds at banquets, in the kitchen, and on the dining couches where the Romans laid down to eat their meals. It meant that I had to understand the food, not just how it was made, but how it tasted."

King points out: "The world's oldest known cookbook bears the name of Apicius, and one of the greatest joys of writing *Feast of Sorrow* was trying to interpret many of the recipes of that cookbook. While flamingo tongues and fried dormice are not appealing to modern palates, I was delighted to learn many other recipes are still delicious today. My husband and I regularly make one of the dishes, Parthian chicken, for dinner!"

Jess Kidd's novel *Himself* (Atria, Mar. 2017; Canongate, Oct. 2016) focuses on a feast of fictional village life rather than culinary delights and dangers. The village at the centre of *Himself* was inspired by Kidd's earliest memories of Ireland and "by the patchwork of stories I heard growing up and the places I have

visited as an adult," she says. "Mulderrig is a fictional location out along the wild west coast. As you'd expect from a setting for a mystery, it's a curtain-twitching, pressure cooker of a town, full of twisted secrets. For all that, it has its own lyrical beauty, a hidden jewel amongst bog and sea and mountain. It's also a place imbued with nostalgia."

The novel begins in 1976, and it was about that time, as Kidd explains, "I started to sit up and look around me. I wanted to capture the magical quality I saw in Ireland as a child, an Ireland where supernatural beings were just out of sight but always in earshot, where the landscape was alive, the sea was mad, and the weather was frequently unholy. April 1976 is the here and now of Mahony's arrival in the village, but his story begins long before this. The narrative spools back to between 1944 and 1950. These flashbacks give a picture of a different Ireland: the Ireland of Mahony's mother.

"In writing this book, I was inspired by the ripples between these different times, by the things that changed and the things that stayed the same. In many ways Mulderrig is a place struggling to come to terms with the past and the present. Mahony's explosive arrival breaks down barriers and forces the town to acknowledge its difficult history. My gateway into the past was through the reminiscences of people I know. Some, unable to find work in Ireland, left to find a living elsewhere. I added their memories of Ireland to my own, so Mulderrig is very much an expression of the country I've experienced and the country I've inherited through the spoken word."

Kidd, like her fellow debut novelists, has opened up a new gateway for readers to access those lives that have been buried in the often-overlooked corners of history. ❁

MYFANWY COOK admires the ingenuity of debut novelists and their ability to share new stories to entertain readers of historical fiction. Please email ([myfanwyc@btinternet.com](mailto:myfanwyc@btinternet.com)) or tweet ([twitter.com/MyfanwyCook](https://twitter.com/MyfanwyCook)) about debut novelists you recommend.

