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S P O T L I G H T

Silent No More

In her historical novel, *Locked in Silence*, **Natalie Zellat Dyen** tells a tale of injustice and redemption in pre-Civil War Philadelphia.

BY BILL DONAHUE

Natalie Zellat Dyen refers to herself as a late bloomer. “I started writing fiction around the time I started collecting Social Security,” she jokes.

Dyen has since had several of her stories published in respected magazines, journals, and anthologies. Her publishing credits will soon include *Locked in Silence*, a work of historical fiction set in pre-Civil War Philadelphia.

Dyen, a Bucks County native, started writing the novel during the pandemic, when libraries and research institutions were shut down. Even so, she was able to connect with librarians and professional researchers who helped her gain a clearer picture of the time, place, and circumstances in which she hoped to set her story.

While *Locked in Silence* represents Dyen’s first foray into historical fiction, she intends to write another historical novel about a strong woman who has been overlooked by history. “There’s no shortage of candidates who meet those criteria,” she adds, “and I’m currently in the process of choosing one who speaks to me.”

Q&A

Give me your “elevator speech” for *Locked in Silence*: what it’s about, when and where it’s set, why you wrote it.

Five years ago, I was listening to an NPR program about the impact of extreme isolation on the brain. It began with a description of Philadelphia’s Eastern State Penitentiary, where prisoners were kept in solitary confinement to reflect on their crimes and find redemption, and I knew I had to put someone inside one of those cells. I had to get inside that person’s head as she suffered the effects of isolation and silence.

Locked in Silence is the story of 18-year-old Lizzy O’Meara, sentenced to four years in the penitentiary in 1848 for killing her baby. In the beginning she’s convinced she’s innocent, but as the months of solitude eat away at her sanity and she is haunted by nightmares, she comes to believe she is a murderer. It’s only after she’s released that she learns the truth about what happened the night she gave birth, and vows to move heaven and earth to reassemble the fragments of her broken life.

Tell me about Lizzy as a character. What about her do you find most appealing?

Lizzy is a fighter. Before her incarceration, she and a black friend were part of the abolitionist movement. Lizzy’s experience fighting for freedom and justice for others helps sustain her during the years she is denied her own freedom. In prison, she is determined to preserve her memories before they fade, so she keeps a journal, forcing herself to write until she is no longer able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Though she suffers many hardships as a woman, she discovers an inner strength that helps her survive the long years in prison.

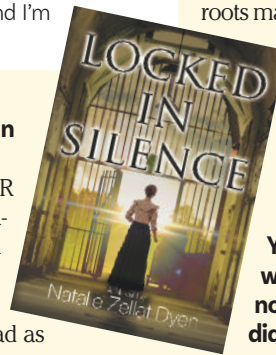
Why did you want to set the story in pre-Civil War Philadelphia?

The story is set in pre-Civil War Philadelphia because those were the years Eastern State Penitentiary enforced a policy of strict isolation, which was relaxed in later years. In researching



Philadelphia in the 1830s to 1850s, I was surprised to discover how violent the city was. Racial hostility frequently erupted into riots, with the Irish attacking the blacks and local fire companies often looking on as black homes burned. At the same time, the city’s Quaker roots made Philadelphia a center of antislavery

activity. This gave me the opportunity to incorporate historical figures into the story, like Lucretia Mott and William Still, who played important roles in the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad.



You dedicate the book to people who discover what they love to do, no matter how old they are. When did you discover that not only did you love to write, but also that you had a talent for it?

Before I retired, I had all kinds of plans for my post-retirement life. But then I took a creative writing course, received positive feedback, and all my plans took a back seat to writing fiction. I discovered that one of the advantages of starting late is that I can take advantage of my life experience to find my writing voice. In fact, the title of my first published story is *Finding Her Voice*. In the process of writing short stories, I have been everything from a wise-cracking old lady, to a dystopian lost soul, to a mother connecting to her child, to whomever I wanted to be.

Also, as someone who has difficulty meditating, I find writing to be great therapy. It’s a way to get my mind off the present and go somewhere far away. Powered by caffeine, there’s nothing like it. ■