PDF | Under the Wide and Starry Sky: A Novel

by Nancy Horan

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adventure as impassioned and unpredictable as any of Stevenson’s own unforgettable tales.

Praise for Under the Wide and Starry Sky

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From the Trade Paperback edition.

Amazon.com Review

Q&A with Author Nancy Horan
Part of it was serendipity. I stumbled upon Robert Louis Stevenson while visiting the Monterey area, where he lived in 1879. Curiosity spurred me on. Why was he there? The more I learned, the more I saw how rich a character he was, how timely his life might be for contemporary readers. But equally engaging was Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, the California woman he fell in love with and pursued. Both Stevenson and Fanny were on their own journeys of discovery when they met. There were plenty of obstacles in their way, but they managed to marry, and their life together after that was marked by adventures and challenges worthy of a Stevenson novel. I felt immediately that they were good company, and I knew from the start they would remain so for the next four or five years—however long it would take to write their story.

At first glance, Robert Louis Stevenson didn’t seem to have much in common with Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne, an American ten years his senior who left her philandering husband in order to pursue an artist’s life in France. Yet he fell passionately in love with her, crossing the Atlantic and the American frontier and risking his life in order to win her hand. Why were they so drawn to each other?

Louis, as he was known by his family and friends, was attracted to Fanny at first by her appearance. He spied her through the window of a French inn where she was dining with some of his artist friends, who had arrived before he did. He was smitten by her earthy good looks, her olive skin, her lack of stiffness. She was entirely unlike the young women his parents had in mind for him, and that was part of her attraction. She rolled her own cigarettes and carried a pistol. Since he was a boy, Louis had fantasized about a life of travel. As he grew to know Fanny, he discovered a fellow free spirit who’d had her own high adventures already. She had lived in Nevada mining camps, and in other ways exhibited the grit associated with pioneer women. Yet she was a lover of books and art who had artistic ambitions of her own.

Fanny was not immediately drawn to Louis. She thought he was charming and entertaining, but immature, eccentric, and a bit melodramatic. As she came to know him, though, she discovered his great talent as a writer, as well as his genuine decency. Stevenson was much loved for his kindness and generosity.

How did Fanny and Louis shape each others’ artistic lives and accomplishments? Has researching and writing Under the Wide and Starry Sky changed your view of such classics as Treasure Island or The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?

Fanny married Louis when he was a relatively unknown travel writer and essayist who was not yet able to support himself with his writing. He began writing novels after he was married to her. He trusted her critical opinions of his work, calling her his “critic on the hearth.” Some biographers believe she meddled too much in his work, yet Stevenson continued the practice of seeking his wife’s opinion for many years. Robert Louis Stevenson was a towering literary figure in the 19th century. Possibly Fanny’s greatest contribution to his achievements (aside from providing a living, breathing example of a complicated woman for his female characterizations) is the fact that her devoted attentions kept him alive despite his terrible ill health.

Simply rereading Treasure Island and The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde has made me appreciate him much more. The two books are very different. Treasure Island, which was serialized in Young Folks magazine when it first appeared, was viewed as a boy’s adventure story, and Stevenson got the reputation of being a children’s author after it was published. I think that reputation fell away with Jekyll and Hyde, which is dark, dark, dark. It is an allegory that strikes a chilling chord in most readers. Interestingly enough, most people today haven’t read it. Yet during the writing of my book, I was struck by how often the names Jekyll and Hyde appear in print, or are spoken in
conversation. Even if the story is not read much today, people understand the theme of it quite well: that in most of us, a duality exists. We contain within ourselves the potential for both good and evil.

Did Stevenson shape Fanny’s literary accomplishments? In some ways, yes. She had written magazine pieces before meeting him, though she’d only published one before their marriage. Later, she wrote several short stories that made it into print. Publication of her stories may have occurred because of Stevenson’s influence with editors. Fanny and Louis collaborated on one collection of linked stories, entitled The Dynamiter, and a play called The Hanging Judge. Nevertheless, I believe Fanny felt frustrated living in the shadow of so popular a figure as her husband. She longed to be appreciated for something more than her value as his helpmeet.

What were some of the obstacles the Stevensons faced, and how did Fanny and Louis help each other navigate them?

The greatest obstacle was Louis’s ill health. He suffered from a serious lung ailment that was thought to be tuberculosis, though some contemporary writers question that diagnosis and suggest that it may have been bronchiectasis. Treatment options for serious lung conditions were limited in the 19th century, and usually involved a change of climate. The Stevensons’ life together became a quest to find a climate that would allow Louis to get out of bed and regain strength and mobility. They lived in the Swiss Alps, the south of France, and Saranac, New York at the urging of Louis’s various doctors. Fanny performed any number of heroic feats to keep him alive, and to get him to safe places where he stood a chance of living longer.

For his part, Louis provided the emotional support Fanny needed to get through a difficult divorce; he also provided the artistic lifestyle she craved, reliability, and through his prolific writing, the financial security she would need if he died. The promise of security was not evident when she married him, though. He was near penniless at the beginning. What he offered her at that time was his gentle, hilarious, brilliant, devoted self. Why did their relationship endure? Certainly it was complicated and often thorny; different individuals might not have stayed the challenging course they faced. But for all their flaws and eccentricities, they loved each other and derived great pleasure from the other’s company. Stevenson was able to say, well along in his relationship with her, that marrying Fanny was the smartest thing he ever did.

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