

# My BOOK

## DANGEROUS LIAISON: FICTION AND HISTORY

by Claudia Riess

Only after I'd written my first couple of novels did I pause to consider what they had in common. It was an eye-opener, learning about myself—my causes—through this formal summarization. One theme I found repeatedly turning up without premeditation was the conflict between staunch independence and romantic love. Another was parenthood, which I used as a bellwether of a character's capacity to love empathetically.

What I had not yet discovered during self-review was my penchant for historical accuracy, since any reference to an historic figure or event in those early novels was in-

cidental, not pivotal. Any error could be corrected in the course of a fact-check, with no need for plot reconstruction.

Ironically, it was the negligible influence of history on my early story lines that made its converse all the more apparent when I began my art history mystery series with *Stolen Light*. Here, with historical facts

integral to the story line, I had to be accurate from the start or chance a major overhaul later on.

Now that I've completed *False Light*, the second novel in the series, I feel compelled to review my mind-set when formulating these stories entwined with history. In fact, with no rulebook on the subject, it may be the obligation of all us writers striving to create a work of authentic fiction—an oxymoronic hybrid if ever there was one—to explain ourselves.

In a nutshell, I'm a stickler for historical accuracy and an incurable romantic. Without distorting history, I take off from it, filling in its gaps with events that conform to its character and that therefore might have been. Then, in a kind of butterfly-effect maneuver, I fast-forward to the present and drop a pair of resourceful lovers into the challenging set of circumstances that has evolved and see if the sleuthing duo can sort it out.

In *False Light* the plot pivots on the fictive machinations of Eric Hebborn, author of *Drawn to Trouble: Confessions of a Master Forger*, published in 1991. Hebborn was a prankish sort, who had a love-hate relationship with art authenticators and a fascination with letters. It was irresistible. I had to devise a brainteaser for him. After publication of his memoir, he encrypts—on my authority—two copies with clues leading to the whereabouts of a number of his brilliant counterfeits. On each of the title pages he pens a tantalizing explanatory letter. One copy he sends to an art expert; the second, he releases into general circulation. The catch: both books are needed to decipher the code. When the two copies are united 25 years later, a Pandora's box of murder and deceit is unleashed.

As in *Stolen Light*, academic sleuths Erika Shawn, an art magazine editor, and Harrison Wheatley, an art history professor, take on what initially appears to be a purely mental, albeit intricate, challenge, this time one created by a forger, Hebborn. But after several associates involved in the encryption probe are murdered, it becomes clear that there are players for whom there's more at stake here than tracking down a scattering of Old Master knockoffs. As the couple—married since their *Stolen Light* venture—become more entangled in the malevolent goings-on and more determined to help bring bring them to an end, both their courage and love-under-fire are tested to their limits. ✦

*False Light*, Claudia Riess, Level Best Books, October 2019, \$16.95

