

"A tantalizing dish of murder,
mystery, romance, and humor."

—V. S. ALEXANDER, author of *The Magdalen Girls*

A PROMISE OF *Ruin*

A DR. GENEVIEVE SUMMERFORD MYSTERY
CUYLER OVERHOLT

Reading Group Guide

1. Sex trafficking is still a major industry today. Why do you think it has managed to persist through the centuries? Do you think anti-trafficking efforts should be aimed at traffickers, prostitutes, customers, or the illegal status of prostitution itself?
2. Genevieve's textbooks suggest that women are evolutionarily programmed to take a coy or passive role in sexual relations, and that they encourage and are excited by aggressive male ardor. Do you think this is true? If it is, does it create a conflict with contemporary women's desire to be treated as an equal in other spheres of life? How can the two be harmonized?
3. Genevieve feels compelled to help find Teresa, regardless of the risks involved. Simon argues that she is putting herself in unnecessary danger. What would you have done, if you were in Genevieve's shoes? Do you think she is being unduly influenced by her past? Where would you draw the line between altruism and self-preservation?
4. Although Genevieve is deeply drawn to Simon, she is also well aware of the difficulties a marriage with him might entail. Do you think she is being wise, overly practical, or something else in her desire to take more time before she commits?
5. Do you believe Simon's refusal to engage in physical intimacy with

Genevieve is an attempt to protect himself, or merely to manipulate her into marrying him?

6. Pauline tells Genevieve that while many women are tricked into the prostitution trade, the majority enter it voluntarily as a way to escape a life of hard work and near destitution. Can you imagine making such a choice? How do you feel about women who do?
7. Why do you think Genevieve finds Pauline and Angela such good company? Are there characteristics the three women share?
8. Katie has little sympathy at first for Teresa's plight, seeming to believe that the girl somehow brought her troubles on herself. Psychologists explain victim blaming as a way of making ourselves feel safe, by assigning other people's misfortunes to forces within their control. Can you think of anytime you might have done something similar, without realizing it?
9. Antonio decides to stand by Teresa, despite everything. Do you think many men at that time would do the same? What about today?
10. What role do the members of the Wieran Club play in the story? What aspects of Simon's and Genevieve's personalities are revealed by their interactions with the boys?
11. "The test of civilization is the estimate of woman," according to a quote in the story. Do you agree? How would you say our society measures up today?

A Conversation with the Author

Why did you choose to write about the white slave trade?

Because sex trafficking is still a huge problem today, and it horrifies me. Like Genna, I am confounded by the mind-set of people who perpetrate this crime and the customers who keep them in business (to the tune of some \$30 billion a year). I wrote about it in part to try to understand it, and also because it touches on the broader question of the balance of power between the sexes, and how that balance, or lack of it, is maintained. In a world where many women are still treated like property or, at best, second-class citizens, I find this a compelling question.

How big of a problem was sex trafficking in Genevieve's time?

It was big. Contemporary writers tend to downplay the white slave panic as a figment of the sexually repressed, nativist, post-Victorian mind. While there is undoubtedly some truth in that view, investigations undertaken by municipal, state, federal, and international bodies during the period documented that thousands of women, both foreign and domestic, were being seduced through deceit or coerced into prostitution. A 1909 report by the U.S. Commissioner-General of Immigration concluded that "an enormous business is constantly being transacted in the importation and distribution of foreign women for the purposes of prostitution, which business includes the seduction and distribution of alien women and girls who have entered the country in a regular manner for legitimate purposes, and to some extent of American women and girls." A Special Immigration Commission report to the Senate that same year pointed out that instead of working in brothels run by women, as in the past, the vast majority of

these new prostitutes were controlled by men who “made it their business to plunder them unmercifully.” A number of state and federal laws were passed as a result of the various investigations, as well as an international agreement requiring signatories to place lookouts in ports and railway stations, supervise employment agencies, and facilitate repatriation of abduction victims. The plethora of criminal convictions that resulted from these laws attests to the reality of the problem. So do the records of the many private organizations that dedicated themselves to patrolling ports and terminals in search of potential victims, which included the Travelers’ Aid Society, the International Catholic Girls’ Protection Society, and the National Council of Jewish Women.

Although your stories touch on issues that are still relevant today, they are firmly rooted in another time. How do you keep them true to the period?

I feel a real obligation to try to depict the period accurately. To that end, I immerse myself in newspaper articles, memoirs, photograph collections, and science texts from the time, gleaning not only facts and figures, but also patterns of speech and cultural biases and other nuances that might help make my fiction as true as possible. A great advantage to setting a series in the early 1900s is that there’s still a large amount of print material around from that period that’s being digitized and made available online. I’m especially cautious when I put words into the mouths of characters who are based on real people, such as Detective Petrosino. Many of the things the detective says in the book come from actual quotes that were reported in newspapers at the time.

What’s your writing process? Are you a pantser or a plotter?

I’m a plotter. Writing a mystery pretty much demands that you figure some things out ahead of time—like who did it and why, where to sprinkle your clues, and what the red herrings will be. But I don’t know everything in advance. I use more of a stepping-stone approach, identifying key points along the story path ahead of time and then filling in around them as I go. Often, new twists will occur to me as I’m writing, or a character

will demand more space, making the story more complex or taking it in a slightly different direction from what I'd originally envisioned.

What drew you to the mystery genre?

Crimes, especially murders, are usually associated with strong emotions, and strong emotions tend to make for good stories. I view the mystery plot as a device for examining how people behave when they're in extremis, which is where all the interesting stuff happens. I also like the challenge of building a story on two levels, trying to lead the reader astray at the same time I'm laying a foundation that will support the big reveal.