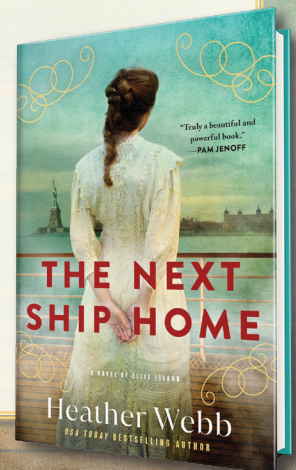


THE NEXT SHIP HOME

BY HEATHER WEBB READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Discuss Francesca's reasons for leaving Italy. What circumstances would cause you to leave your home?
2. Francesca is warned that some immigrant women have been funneled into workhouses or servitude by scam artists. How does the immigration process make people more vulnerable? What protections would you suggest to prevent these types of exploitation?
3. Describe Alma's mother, Johanna. How does her own security compete with her children's needs? Do you think she could have stood up to Robert more?
4. Francesca and Maria are first denied entry to the U.S. because they have no male relatives to meet them and no employment arranged. What was the reasoning behind these limiting policies? How do they compare to modern immigration requirements?
5. Alma's first instinct is to report all types of corruption she sees—from the vendor giving incorrect change to matrons resorting to physical violence. Still, her coworkers repeatedly convince her not to say anything. What persuaded her to keep quiet? Would you have done something different in her place?
6. As she confesses her sins, Francesca hopes that her God would understand her intentions. At the time of each "sin," she felt she was making the only choice available to her. Do you think she acted immorally throughout the book? Why or why not?
7. Most of the Ellis Island staff disdains Commissioner Williams when he takes charge. Did he deserve their distrust? How do the opinions of Alma's coworkers shape her interactions with the commissioner?
8. Francesca agrees to help her coworker Janie find the rat in her bedroom, knowing that it might curb some of Janie's cruel behavior. Would you have helped Janie? Are there circumstances where helping others—or making yourself indispensable to them—is not a worthwhile strategy?
9. Alma is appalled to discover that her coworkers were already aware of John Lambert's mistreatment of immigrant women. How did his position and the criminalization of sex work protect him from consequences? Do you think the coworkers who turned a blind eye share responsibility for his crimes?
10. How does fear of the unknown dominate immigration policy, both in the past and the present?



THE NEXT SHIP HOME

BY HEATHER WEBB

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What first drew you toward writing and historical fiction in particular?

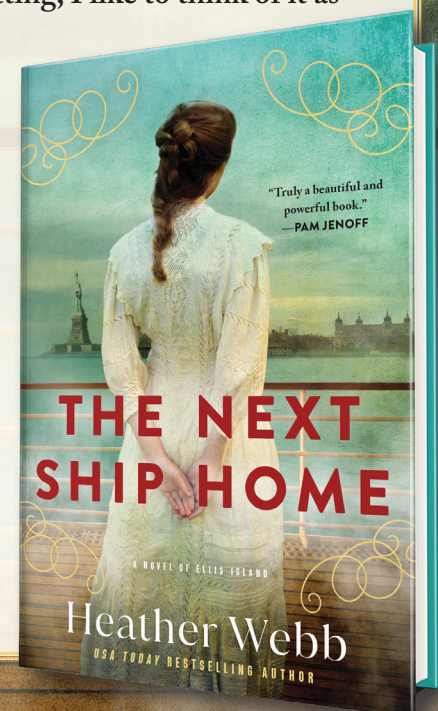
I had a dream about Josephine Bonaparte! She took me on a tour of a château every night for a week, and finally, I decided this was a very strange occurrence and picked up a biography about her to learn a little more about her life. I read half of that biography and knew—almost like a lightning bolt—that I had to write a book about her. It was the strangest thing! When I told my husband I was going to write a novel, he looked at me like I was from another planet. I'd never talked about writing a book before that moment. When I look back at my life now, however, I realize I was always a writer. I won essay contests in high school, was the copy editor of my high school and college newspapers, and I carried books around with me as if they were a lifeline. I loved everything about poetry and classic novels and, of course, history. One of my favorite places to spend time still to this day is at museums or historical sites.

Where do you start a new project? Do your characters, plot, or setting come first?

It really depends on the book. If the book focuses on a particular event in history, I start with plot and setting, and develop a fictional character that would be the most challenged within the context of that story. If I'm writing biographical fiction (like *Becoming Josephine*, *Rodin's Lover*, and my up-and-coming work on Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner), I begin with the character and really delve into the details of their lives and expand into different themes from there. As for setting, I like to think of it as a character as well and really enjoy digging into that aspect of writing.

Did your ancestors travel through Ellis Island, and if so, did any of their experiences appear in the book?

My ancestors came before Ellis Island, actually. On my dad's side, I have relatives who date back to the early 1600s and on my mother's, the mid-1800s. I did give my grandmother a nod in the book, whose family was from Sicily originally, by naming a character after her. My grandmother Alberta is quite the devout Catholic so it was fun for me (and her) to have a benevolent and caring nun named after her.



THE NEXT SHIP HOME

BY HEATHER WEBB

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

Your research drew from newspaper archives, the *Oral History Project*, and many other books. How did you handle gaps in the historical record?

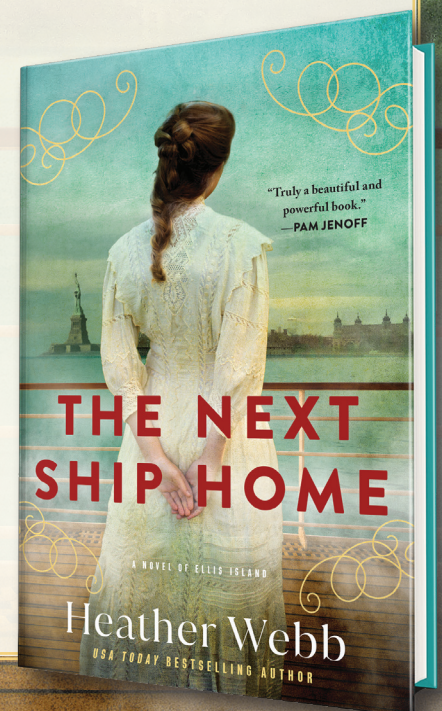
Gaps in the record is where a historical author has fun! Both of my main characters in *The Next Ship Home* are fictional, so you won't find them on the record. The story and the setting through which they move, however, is inspired by facts about the operations at Ellis Island as well as the history of the labor movement, anarchism, the tenement culture, and the beginnings of the subway in 1902 New York City. The gaps give me wiggle room to write dialogue or what I call "putting words into the characters' mouths." It gives me room to create tension and tone and mood as well and to add dramatic elements that give the story more complexity.

Alma's engagement and Francesca's pregnancy both highlight the vulnerabilities of women in the early twentieth century. What is the most challenging part of writing independent-minded characters within such rigid social structures?

I have to admit, this is one reason why I enjoy writing alternating points of view with male characters. The men had so much freedom! I don't have to construct reasons why they don't have chaperones or why they're wearing a hat and slacks or why their manners are less than perfect. On the other hand, those restrictions create challenges for my female characters on the page and finding ways they may overcome them is part of the fun of the craft. It's inspiring to research a woman who has defied conventions, ultimately paving the way for women today. It feels as if I'm doing a small justice by giving her much-deserved time in the limelight. Many of the challenges that Francesca faces are still issues for immigrants around the globe today.

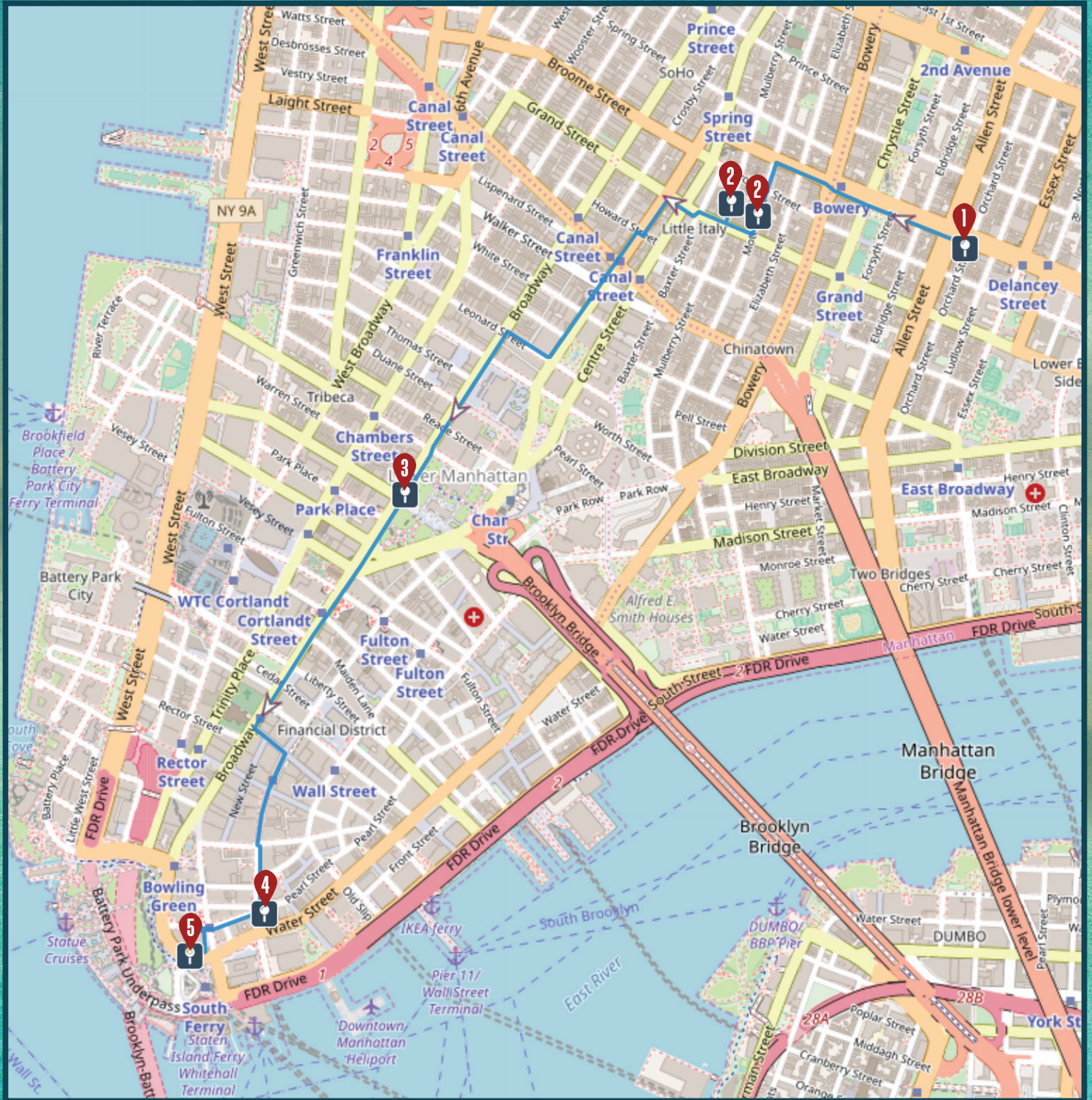
What do you hope readers will learn about immigration from *The Next Ship Home*?

I hope readers may see not only the abuse that took place during that time at Ellis Island and the power differential between immigration official and immigrant, but also that the issue of immigration isn't cut and dry. The laws governing immigration were, and are still, continuously shifting. I hope my readers were able to get a feel for how difficult and complex the issues surrounding immigration can be.



THE NEXT SHIP HOME

WALKING TOUR POINTS OF INTEREST MAP: AS TOLD BY THE AUTHOR!



SEE MAP PLOT POINT DETAILS ON FOLLOWING PAGE.

THE NEXT SHIP HOME

WALKING TOUR POINTS OF INTEREST MAP: AS TOLD BY THE AUTHOR!

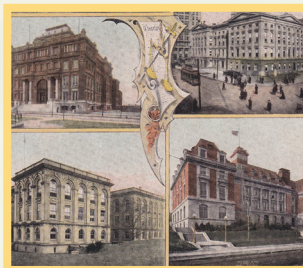


1. **The Tenement Museum on Orchard Street** has a walking tour of a traditional tenement where a German family owned a bierhall. (<https://www.tenement.org/>) It's a great experience, and I highly recommend it, as well as their other culturally interesting and important tours featuring the waves of immigration to New York City.

Image Credit: Creative Commons CCo License | Tenement Building at 97 Orchard Street, 97 Orchard St. New York

2. **Mott Street and Mulberry Street** are still considered Little Italy as it was then in 1902, though it's pretty touristy these days rather than authentic. In the early 1900s, the wealthy would travel to that area of the city to gawk at the poor and tell their friends how brave they were to slum it. Believe it or not, this was a trendy thing to do.

Image Credit: "Italian Neighborhood with Street Market, Mulberry Street, New York by Detroit Publishing, ca. 1900-1910 (LOC)" by pingnews.com is licensed under CC PDM 1.0

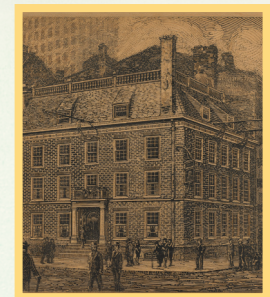


3. **New York City Hall:** Female immigrants that arrived unmarried and without the escort of a male relative were either sent home, or if they came with a beau or future husband candidate, they were escorted by an inspector to be married at City Hall before being admitted to the country.

Image Credit: King's Color-graphs of New York City | City Hall Park (New York City)

4. **Fraunces Tavern:** This tavern has been around for two and a half centuries! Today, it's a whiskey bar and restaurant with live music on the bottom floor, but it once served as a meeting place for George Washington and his men and other politically important people from the American Revolutionary era. On the top floor, there's a great little museum with maps, paintings, and other mementos from that era to see. The tavern also served pints to many immigrants that arrived on America's shores.

Image Credit: Charles Macowin Tuttle | Department of Drawings and Prints, Metropolitan Museum of Art | Creative Commons CCo



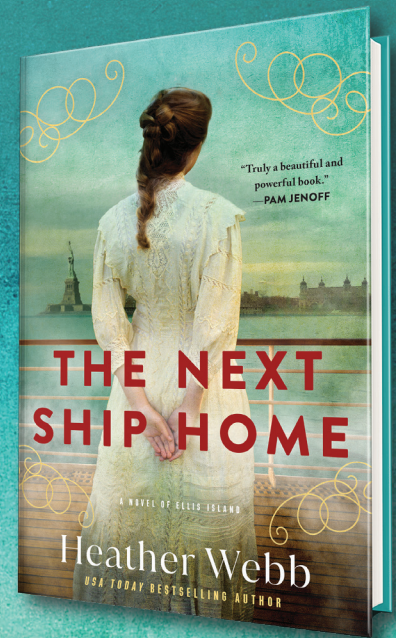
5. **James Watson House at 7 State Street:** This is now a shrine to the first American saint, Elizabeth Bayley Seton. It served as an immigrant boarding house for women to safeguard them from those trying to trick them into employment as prostitutes and other unsavory jobs, starting in 1885.

Image Credit: 2008 | Jim Henderson | James Watson House from Battery Park on a sunny late winter afternoon

THE NEXT SHIP HOME

ELLIS ISLAND FACTS

AS TOLD BY THE AUTHOR!

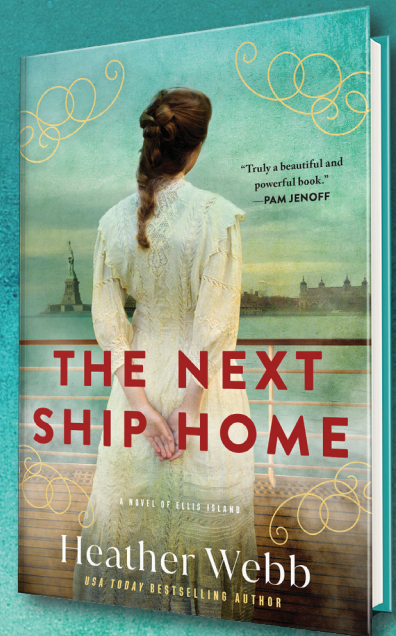


1. Ellis Island has had many names: Little Oyster Island, Dyre Island, Gibbet Island, and finally, Ellis Island. It was originally a mere three acres of sand and mud with high marshland in which magnificent oyster beds flourished. Until the last seventy-five years, oysters were considered a poor man's food.
2. At one time, Ellis Island was called Gibbet Island after the hanging post, a gibbet. Pirates were hung on Gibbet Island for murder.
3. Twelve million immigrants passed through the halls of Ellis Island between its opening in 1892 and its closing in 1954.
4. There were two versions of the immigration center at Ellis Island. The first building was made of Georgia pine and burned in a fire there in 1897. Most of the country's immigration records dating back to 1855 were lost as well. The second version was made of fireproof stone and brick and enlarged to house up to four thousand immigrants.
5. After the new immigration building was completed, plans were made to enlarge Ellis Island from three acres to the twenty-seven-acre space comprised of the three islands we know today.
6. It is said that immigrants' names were changed at Ellis Island, but it is a rumor that has been debunked by multiple reputable sources, even though this urban legend persists today. Ellis Island employees received each ship ledger and copied names directly from the list of passengers into their books as the immigrants were being registered. Therefore, an immigrant's misspelled name was originally recorded in the country of origin. With illiteracy rampant during this era, in particular among the incoming immigrants, it's no wonder that names were misspelled. Many immigrants also changed their names once admitted to the country for ease among English-speakers and to avoid prejudices.

THE NEXT SHIP HOME

COMPANION PLAYLIST

RECOMMENDED BY HEATHER WEBB



As recommended by the author, enjoy a companion playlist to *The Next Ship Home*, featuring top 40 hits from 1902, German bierhall songs, and traditional Sicilian music.

1. “The Entertainer” by Scott Joplin
2. “Tell Me, Pretty Maiden” by Byron G. Harlan
3. “Good Morning, Carrie” by Bert Williams and George Walker
4. “Ein Prosit der Gemütlichkeit” by Die Original Wiesen Buben
5. “Sierra Madre” by Zillertaler Schürzenjäger
6. “Fliegerlied” by Tim Toupet
7. “Ciuri Ciuri” by Antonio Vasquez e Franco Li Causi (Vasquez)
8. “Vitti ‘Na Crozza” by Siculounge Project
9. “Lu Minaturi” by Domenico Modugno (Modugno)