David Crumm’s review of Cave of Secrets

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Lynne Golodner

Immerse yourself in a pitch-perfect Scottish romance (with a bonus: ghosts)

My wife and I share a family tree with deep roots in both Ireland and Scotland. However, we’ve never set foot in Ireland. Why are we so partial? That’s thanks to the powerful influence of my wife’s iron-willed grandmother who was born near Edinburgh. Because of her dominant spirit in our family, we have focused our UK-bound travels on our own modest-but-beloved ancestral homelands in Scotland.

So, any time a novelist perfectly evokes that wondrous landscape and infectious culture, we’re hooked. Over the decades, we’ve read everything from dense volumes of Scottish history (I’m counting three books just about the tragic battle of Culloden on my shelves) to cozy mysteries set in Scotland (too many to count) to individual biographies and book-length profiles of fascinating, little-known Scottish communities (like the tragedy of St. Kilda). And that’s in addition to all of the reading I’ve done about the influence of Scotland on Celtic theology and mysticism.

Why do we read so much about Scotland? That reading fuels our dreams of the next places we’d like to visit.

So, at this point, we know the authentic “tells” of Scottish tales. Ghosts often are stock in trade—as are other hauntingly supernatural twists. That’s obvious from the era of Scott and Stevenson to popular Scottish writers today like Kate Atkinson. And, when we turn to the realms of Celtic spirituality? Well, one needs a broad mind and heart to take it all in.

So, please forgive the length of this personal introduction—but it’s relevant to explain why Lynne Golodner’s new novel *Cave of Secrets* rings all kinds of nostalgic homecoming bells for us. She has spent enough time in Scotland to have soaked up the taste, smell, sound and feel of the place from pubs to craggy hills that burn the legs of hikers who think they will easily scale those often surprisingly steep slopes. Based on our own experiences in Scotland over many years, Lynne’s fictional world is pitch perfect.

Our feeling of “home” in *Cave of Secrets* extends to certain characters. There’s an iron-willed matriarch at the head of the novel’s main Scottish clan. This tough, bigoted old bird named Margaret causes lots of trouble for her descendants. And wow! Did we recognize that kind of Scottish matriarch! Remember the grandmother I mentioned in my opening paragraph? Like the fictional Margaret, our own late grandmother (of mostly blessed memory) was infamous for wielding her “loving” instincts about the family in ways that were deeply problematic. I’m

simply trying to emphasize, without spoiling any of the many wonderful secrets in Lynn's novel, that for this Scottish-American family, we fully recognize a lot of these characters as much like our own clan.

However, this novel isn't a family saga, as such. And, although ghosts appear, it's not mainly a ghost story, either. Lynne's novel, on balance, is really a "contemporary romance"—and a story that, along the way, connects with very contemporary issues of identity and bigotry.

In *Cave of Secrets,* pretty much everyone is seeking love—both "now" and in two different earlier eras in this clan's history. The main romance is between American archivist "Eve" and the scion of Margaret's Scottish family: pub owner "Mac."

The novel's core "message" is about the toxic nature of secrets in general—especially hidden bigotry. The actual "cave of secrets" in the book's title is uncovered by Eve in the opening pages. It's a real cave. Eve finds tangible secrets in the form of letters from long, long ago that connect with Margaret's and Mac's family history. But, as we read, we discover that nearly every single character in the novel is concealing at least one big, uncomfortable secret. In fact, to start your group discussion, you could hang white newsprint sheets on the walls of your meeting room, list all the characters' names—then have fun asking other readers to list both each character's love interest and their most toxic secret.

And here's another tip for your discussion group: Have fun nominating the actors to portray these roles in the movie version of Lynn's novel. I will start by nominating Scarlett Johansson for Eve and James McAvoy for Mac (both are a bit too old for the roles as written but both could work for the movie version) and then we envision someone like Fionnula Flanagan as Margaret (again, Flanagan's too old but you get the idea).

We also heartily recommend Lynne's earlier novel, *Woman of Valor,* and can say to potential customers of this new book: No, you do not have to read *Valor* to appreciate this whole new mixed stew of characters.

We can't wait to discover where Lynne's third novel will carry us in 2025.