

RED PENCIL

CINDY VALLAR analyzes the work behind polished final manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Kathleen McGowan's *The Expected One*.

Characters are the lifeblood of any story. Without them the story sits on the page and goes nowhere. The characters draw the reader into the story and make the reader care what happens. In most fiction, authors invent their characters and each has his/her own biography and traits so that that character becomes a three-dimensional person. In historical fiction, authors often populate their novels with both fictional characters and real people. It is the melding of these two entities that make the past come alive. But what if one of your characters is an icon in history – someone whose original life has grown far beyond what she/he was in real life?

This was the dilemma Kathleen McGowan faced as she wrote *The Expected One*. While much of the novel occurs in 2004 and 2005, history plays such an important role in the story that *The Expected One* is both historical fiction and contemporary religious thriller. While in Jerusalem to research a new book, journalist Maureen Paschal begins a quest to learn about the real Mary Magdalene. The journey takes her to the Languedoc region of France, where she searches for scrolls that the maligned follower of Jesus wrote after his crucifixion.

Thus, Kathleen found herself confronting the problem of taking real people – specifically Mary Magdalene, Jesus, and John the Baptist – and turning them into living, breathing characters. “The difficulty here is that you are dealing with religious figures, who bring with them a set of expectations that are above those of other historical personages. This is most certainly true with Jesus. I was so careful when writing the chapters that brought him to life. I inflicted major restrictions on myself during that part of the writing process: I prayed for guidance before sitting down to write, and I would only work if I was feeling really clear and positive. This was a spiritual process for me as much as an artistic process. It is an important part of my belief system, and certainly of Mary Magdalene’s perspective, that Jesus was a man of immense warmth as well as wisdom. I wanted to convey the power of his humanity without losing his divinity, and vice versa.

“One thing I did which I believe turned out well and was important to giving me more freedom in the story was that I didn’t refer to him as Jesus. In the book Mary refers to him by a nickname, Easa, which is derived from the Greek pronunciation of Jesus. So I used Easa throughout the book, because I felt that it allowed people to separate their iconic ideas of Jesus and investigate this more human character called Easa.

“I was also careful during certain sequences to use dialogue that was derived from the gospels directly. Much of the passage with Jesus/

Easa and John the Baptist is taken directly from the Bible, although I adapted it somewhat to fit the new perspective on the situation. There are a number of places – the wedding at Cana, the temple in Jerusalem – where Jesus/Easa speaks lines from the New Testament verbatim.

“Writing Mary Magdalene was far easier as there is very little known about her in traditional, biblical or academic sources so I had a lot more freedom with her. Most fiction writers will tell you the same thing: that there is this magical thing that happens with certain characters. They become so real to you that they take over the story. This was very true of Mary. I watched her grow and her story evolves much as the reader does.”

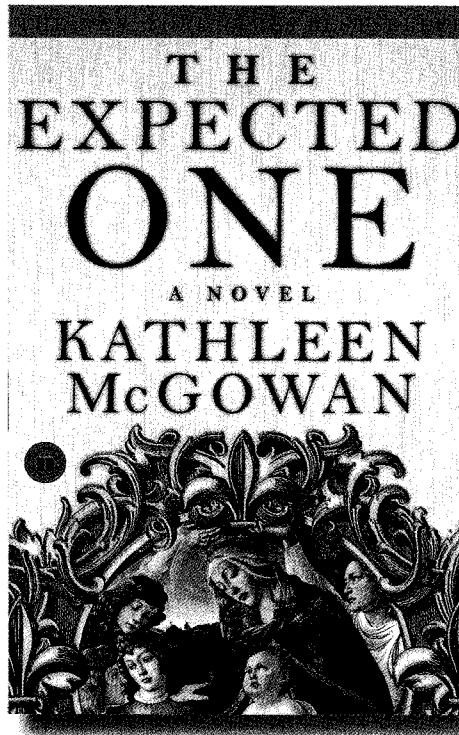
Kathleen found that writing the scenes where Mary Magdalene recounts her life with Jesus easier to write than those involving Maureen, and I agree. Mary Magdalene’s passages are elegant, inviting, and flowing, whereas Maureen’s are sometimes distancing and jerky. “In general, I also find that the historical elements flow freer and easier than the modern scenes – and they’re much more fun to write! There is so much to work with when writing historical fiction, so many fun details to play with for your characters. I also think that writing Maureen was a challenge for me because she’s a little too close to home, and I got in my own way and over-thought the character as a result, basically driving myself crazy. With Magdalene, however, I felt such an intense need to tell her story that I wrote those chapters in an almost feverish passion. As a result, there were very few changes from the first draft to the final draft of the first century chapters, while there were many changes and much editing in the modern sequences.”

In an early scene in *The Expected One*, Maureen visits Jerusalem. After receiving an ancient ring from a shopkeeper, she experiences a vision that will eventually lead her on her quest. Kathleen writes, “While researching this book I began to have strange recurring dreams, and some would say visions, about the final days in Jesus’ life. My first attempt to write this was very close to what actually occurred in my bedroom in 1997:”

She was in the middle of a crowd, a mob more accurately. All around her was chaos – there was much shouting and shoving, great commotion on all sides. Maureen took notice that the figures around her were robed and wore sandals; most were men, bearded and grimy. The relentless sun of early afternoon beat down upon them, mixing sweat with dirt on the angry and distressed faces around her. She was at the edge of a narrow road, and the crowd just ahead of her began to jostle emphatically. A natural gap was evolving, and a small grouping moved slowly along the path – the mob appeared to be following this huddle. As the moving mass came closer, Maureen saw the woman for the first time.

A solitary and still island in the center of the chaos, she was one of the few women in the crowd – but that was not what made her different. It was her bearing, a regal

demeanor that marked her as a queen despite the layer of dirt covering her hands and feet. Her clothing was simple and she was slightly disheveled, lustrous auburn hair coming loose from the plait hanging to her waist. Maureen knew instinctively that she had to reach this woman, needed to connect with her, touch her, speak to her. But the writhing crowd held her back, and she was moving in the slow motion thickness of the dream state. As she continued to struggle in the direction of the woman, Maureen was struck by the aching beauty of the face that was just out of her reach. She was fine boned, with exquisite, delicate features. But it was her eyes that would haunt Maureen long after the dream was over. The woman’s eyes, huge and bright with unshed tears, fell somewhere in the color spectrum between amber and sage, an extraordinary light hazel that reflected infinite wisdom and unbearable sadness in one heart-searing blend. The woman’s soul swallowing gaze met Maureen in a brief and interminable moment, conveying through those improbable eyes a plea of complete and utter desperation.



You Must Help Me.

Somehow, Maureen knew that the plea was directed at her. For some inexplicable reason, she was the only one who could help this strange, suffering queen. A swell of intense emotion moved through Maureen at this understanding, just as the mob surged again, drowning her in a sea of sweat and despair.

Kathleen admits that this draft of the scene lacks emotion. It keeps the reader at arm’s length, rather than allowing him/her to stand beside Maureen as she witnesses the chaos and sees Mary Magdalene for the first time. “What I learned from writing this passage is that fiction is more fun and more expressive. This scene feels very mechanical, and yet the dream portion of it is verbatim. So I kept the dream (nearly) intact (I expanded it for foreshadowing effect by adding the child) and jettisoned the rest, preferring instead to place

the entire experience in the Old City of Jerusalem, which is a far more dramatic setting than my bedroom in suburban Los Angeles. Also, this is really the reader’s first encounter with Mary Magdalene, as it was mine in ‘real life’ so I felt it was crucial for this to be as powerful as possible. Setting it in Israel gave it far more impact. It also presented me with the challenge of how to explain the sense of a vision to those who have never had one.

“You will see that I kept the description of Magdalene’s eyes exactly as I first wrote it, as that moment has haunted me since the first time I had the dream. I will never forget the color of her eyes, and I wanted to give the reader that same sense of intensity.” Does she succeed? Here is how the scene unfolds in the published version of *The Expected One*:

Maureen returned to the Via Dolorosa, where she found the Eighth Station just as Mahmud had directed her. But she was disquieted and unable to concentrate, feeling strange after the encounter with the shopkeeper. Continuing on her path, the earlier sense of dizziness returned, stronger this time, to the point of disorientation. It was her first day in Jerusalem and she was undoubtedly suffering jet lag. The flight from Los Angeles had been long and arduous, and she hadn’t

slept much the night before. Whether it was a combination of heat, exhaustion, and hunger, or something more unexplainable, what happened next was outside Maureen's realm of experience.

Finding a stone bench, Maureen eased herself down to rest. She swayed with another wave of unexpected vertigo as a blinding flash emanated from the relentless sun, transporting her thoughts.

She was thrown abruptly into the middle of a mob. All around her was chaos – there was much shouting and shoving, great commotion on all sides. Maureen had enough of her modern wits about her to notice that the swarming figures were robed in coarse, homespun garments. Those who had shoes wore a crude version of a sandal; she noticed as one stepped down hard on her foot. Most were men, bearded and grimy. The omnipresent sun of early afternoon beat down upon them, mixing sweat with dirt on the angry and distressed faces around her. She was at the edge of a narrow road, and the crowd just ahead began to jostle emphatically. A natural gap was evolving, and a small group moved slowly along the path. The mob appeared to be following this huddle. As the moving mass came closer, Maureen saw the woman for the first time.

A solitary and still island in the center of the chaos, she was one of the few women in the crowd – but that was not what made her different. It was her bearing, a regal demeanor that marked her as a queen despite the layer of dirt covering her hands and feet. She was slightly disheveled, lustrous auburn hair tucked partially beneath a crimson veil that covered the lower half of her face. Maureen knew instinctively that she had to reach this woman, needed to connect with her, touch her, speak to her. But the writhing crowd held her back, and she was moving in the slow-motion thickness of a dream state.

As she continued to struggle in the direction of the woman, the aching beauty of the face that was just out of her reach struck Maureen. She was fine-boned, with exquisite, delicate features. But it was her eyes that would haunt Maureen long after the vision was over. The woman's eyes, huge and bright with unshed tears, fell somewhere in the color spectrum between amber and sage, an extraordinary light hazel that reflected infinite wisdom and unbearable sadness in one heart-searing blend. The woman's soul-swallowing gaze met Maureen's in a brief and interminable moment, conveying through those improbable eyes a plea of complete and utter desperation.

You must help me.

Maureen knew that the plea was directed at her. She was entranced, frozen, as her eyes locked with the woman's. The moment was broken when the woman looked down suddenly at a young girl who tugged urgently at her hand.

The child looked up with huge hazel eyes that echoed her mother's. Behind her stood a boy, older and with darker eyes than the little girl, but clearly the son of this woman. Maureen knew in that inexplicable instant then that she was the only person who could help this strange, suffering queen and her children. A swell of intense confusion, and something that felt far too much like grief, moved through her at this realization.

Then the mob surged again, drowning Maureen in a sea of sweat and despair.

Using verbs that show action creates a more powerful scene and engages the reader. This time Kathleen shows the scene, rather than tells it. Now the reader stands beside Maureen, witnessing what she witnesses, feeling what she feels. The author no longer exists.

When Kathleen set out to write this story, she thought the entire novel would take place in the 1st century. Her research and how she uncovered it convinced her to do otherwise. “. . . I realized that the truth of how I uncovered this material was so epic and extraordinary

*History is not what happened.
History is what was written
down.*
- Kathleen McGowan

in and of itself, that this was really part of the story. And as I wrote, it became clear that the modern story supported the ancient story. In other words, while I was making what some would call outrageous claims about the 1st century, the modern story provided corroboration and explanation of how I came to this version, and ultimately made it more palatable, and I hope enjoyable and satisfying, for the reader.

“My only regret is there are some who won't classify this book as 'historical fiction' because the first half of the book takes place in modern day. I think that's unfortunate, because the research that I undertake to make my historical characters and settings authentic is very thorough and done with ultimate dedication. I personally do think of myself as an author of historical fiction.”

Like her character Maureen, Kathleen believes “[h]istory is not what happened. History is what was written down.” This is something that many writers of historical fiction realize as they research their novels, for those who record events or write histories about them usually have an agenda or relate the incidents through the eyes of the victor or the victim. Kathleen “came to this conclusion by finding time and again that the history books have lied to us and continue to do so. Call me a radical, but I'm at the point now where I don't believe anything that was committed to writing at face value. All of it was written with an agenda, either political, social or religious. Where women are concerned, they were either vilified and demonized or often just eliminated completely – totally left out of the story despite their enormous importance, like Claudia Procula, the wife of Pontius Pilate. We have periods where history was literally re-written by monks who believed that all women were the daughters of Eve and the root of all evil. The Vulgate monks believed that women had no souls. So here are situations where the roles of women were very deliberately re-written.”

In her novel's afterword, Kathleen writes, “Two millennia of controversy have made Mary Magdalene the most elusive character of the New Testament. In my quest to find the real woman behind the legend, I realized that I had no desire to rehash all of the traditional sources as interpreted by the usual suspects. I wrapped myself in the warm cloak of the folklorist and went in search of a deeper mystery.”

What qualifies Kathleen to write *The Expected One*? “I have always had a love, respect and fascination for the idea of sacred partnership

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... The idea that Jesus could have been married fascinated me when I first stumbled upon it, as many people did, in the late 1980s with the British bestseller, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. I added Mary Magdalene to my ever-growing list of powerful women who had been maligned and misunderstood, never dreaming that her story would completely take over my world. But it did, and I'm glad it did. It has been an amazing and blessed journey through her life.

“On a personal note, I also discovered along the way that my paternal grandmother’s family name, Paschal, was tied to the ‘heretics’ who lived in the Languedoc and had preserved the secret teachings of Mary and Easa. That was quite a wonderful shock, and the reason that my lead character’s surname is Paschal.”

As the writer creates her story, her characters grow and develop, changing from one-dimensional ideas into believable “people” with strengths and weaknesses, good points and bad ones. They come alive and invite the reader to journey with them through the tribulations and joys that are part of everyday life be it now, in the past, or tomorrow.

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