

Professor giving new life to historic Ithaca literature

JASON POTEL, Guest Columnist 10:24 a.m. EST November 7, 2014



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Story Highlights

- Grace Miller White gained national fame with *Tess of the Storm Country*, published in 1909
- IC's prof David Kramer is restoring the reputation of the work by republishing an annotated version
- The novel poignantly reflects changes in women's roles around the turn of the century

Serving as the home to two well-respected academic institutions, Ithaca has long been a popular residence for prolific writers. One early Ithaca author in particular found prestige by producing a best-selling novel that was both written in Ithaca and explicitly about the city itself.

Grace Miller White quickly gained national fame with *Tess of the Storm Country*, published in 1909, a popular novel written in Ithaca that was inspired by current events and cultural currents at the time of its conception, thus blending history with fiction.

Though the novel proved to be an immediate bestseller, as well as the inspiration for four films with stars such as Mary Pickford and directors such as Edwin S. Porter, it has fallen into obscurity. Ithaca College English professor David Kramer is working to restore the reputation of the work by republishing a fully annotated version in the near future.

White's tale centers on the life of Tess, a girl of the Rhine, Ithaca's poverty-stricken West End neighborhood. Throughout the girl's journey in search for a better life she embraces religion and her character encounters actual historical occurrences happening in Ithaca at the time. Perhaps the most identifiable real-world incident to surface in the novel is the tragic Chi-Psi Fire of 1906. Several secondary characters within the story belong to the "Cranium" fraternity, a pseudonym for the well-known frat which was located in one of the largest and most ornate private homes ever to be built in Ithaca. Running parallel with history, the house catches ablaze one evening in the dead of winter: heroism, cowardice, death, and plot twists ensue. Though the names of the students and their organization have been changed, the historical events are faithfully represented in the novel.

Another documented piece of Ithaca's past is the depiction of squatters caught illegally netting fish in Cayuga Lake. Around the turn of the century the Rhine area on the southwest shore of Cayuga Lake was populated by impoverished squatters, who often resorted to illegally fishing in restricted waters. The traditional punishment for such a crime was around a two-month sentence in prison with a \$15 fine. The squatters within the novel, however, find themselves in somewhat hotter water; Tess' father is accused of shooting the game warden, which develops into the central conflict of the narrative.

The novel poignantly reflects changes in women's roles around the turn of the century. Throughout the story, White depicts a group of determined women maintaining their right to speak during their church prayer meetings. As modernity encroaches upon the religiously and culturally reactionary of the town, it becomes increasingly clear that women will have a voice. White wrote this during the midst of the suffrage movement in which Ithaca women sought to have their voices heard politically. Only 10 years earlier, in 1899, the Women's Political Study

Club separated itself from the Ithaca Women's Club, establishing an independent organization for women to discuss politics freely, in anticipation of the day they would be granted the right to vote.

With Dr. Kramer's work commenced earlier this summer, a new edition of the book is well on the way, which will be augmented by footnotes on and illustrations of the many ways that this locally produced bestseller reflected the events, culture, and issues of 1909 Ithaca.

Then & Now appears monthly in The Ithaca Journal and is provided by the History Center in Tompkins County. Jason Potel is a junior at Ithaca College who is assisting Prof. David Kramer in his research on Grace Miller White's novel.