

Former UT Austin English Professor Releases New Historical Novel

Posted on **October 15, 2015** by **Jessica Sinn**



Former UT Austin creative writing professor Elizabeth Harris recently released *Mayhem: Three Lives of a Woman* (October, Gival Press), a novel that follows the causes and consequences of an unusual crime.

Two stock farmers in Central Texas (circa 1936) are accused of castrating a neighbor under circumstances deriving from standard gender and social relations. The daughter of prominent landowners, regarded as the cause of this crime, is outcast from home and family, rescued by clergy in the role of plot angels, and becomes a paid laborer in other people's homes, where she undergoes a muted, nearly 20-year recovery from trauma.

As to what makes a historical novel, Harris replies, "Some definitions say a detailed, realistic, historical setting, which I tried to give *Mayhem*, and a fidelity to the culture and society of the period, which, as imagined in *Mayhem*, shape the action."

The setting of Harris' novel is a synthesis of rural places in Central Texas, 1917-1954.

"Other definitions want the historical novel to be about a historical event or person, like Gerald Duff's new novel about Custer's Last Stand, or Charles Frazier's novel *Cold Mountain*, about a wounded Confederate deserter making his way homeward in the North Carolina mountains," says Harris.

But in *Mayhem* the characters and events are fictional, although some details of the crime and its consequences are based on one that occurred in Texas at a different period.

Harris attributes her interest in historical settings to her Texas family's closeness to the past.

"My father's father—the only one of my grandparents not born in Texas—was born in 1861, at the beginning of the Civil War. He had an Alabama childhood memory from the end of the War."

"Alternating between delighting you with pastoral descriptions of the Hill Country, lulling you with sepia-tones portraits of the good ol' days, and smacking you in the face with the gender, race, and class conventions. . . of the period, *Mayhem* is a surprising blend of plot-driven crime story, character study, and social critique. . . .When you decide you know where this is going, Evelyn hijacks the plot. It's not what you think it is—it's better." – Michelle Newsby, Lone Star Literary Life

Visit the author's website to learn more and view the book trailer. <http://elizabethharriswriter.com/> .

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