

contributors

PHYLLIS POSNICK

"Lupita inspired us all. She is elegant, beautiful, intelligent, and knows how to make a picture better."

THE EXECUTIVE FASHION EDITOR ON "GRACE NOTES" (PAGE 86)



POSNICK, NYONG'O, AND JANSSON ON LOCATION IN MOROCCO

MIKAEL JANSSON

"The medina was a bit of a labyrinth but gorgeous. We needed a location to complement Lupita's beauty."

THE PHOTOGRAPHER ON SELECTING THE SETTING FOR "GRACE NOTES" (PAGE 86)



SMITH, WEARING A NINA RICCI DRESS AND MANOLO BLAHNIK SANDALS, IN NEW ORLEANS

KATY SIMPSON SMITH

"That first year of writing fiction felt a little like I had wandered off a plane into the open air with nothing beneath me. But I was happier at that terrifying altitude than I had ever been before."

THE BREAKOUT WRITER ON COMMITTING TO HER CRAFT ("LIVING HISTORY," PAGE 124)

DANA SCHUTZ

With vivid color and disorienting geometry, Dana Schutz makes the impossible apparent. The Michigan-born artist, who earned her first museum retrospective at 27, churns questions such as how a face might consume itself into paintings like visual Möbius strips. "I want to put something real into the world, something that has the feeling of consequence," says the 37-year-old, profiled in "The Creator," by Dodie Kazanjian (page 128). Once she's hit her mark, "there is usually a short high that quickly deflates. Then it's on to the next painting."



SCHUTZ, IN HER BROOKLYN STUDIO

POSNICK, NYONG'O, AND JANSSON: COURTESY OF REBECCA SIDES CAPELLAN; SMITH: ANNEMARIEKE VAN DRIMMELEN; SITTINGS EDITOR: SARA MOONVES; HAIR: EDWARD LAMLEY FOR BUMBLE AND BUMBLE; MAKEUP: ASAMI TAGUCHI; SET DESIGN: MARK HANNIBAL; SCHUTZ: ANNIE LEBOVITZ; DETAILS: SEE IN THIS ISSUE.

Living History

Katy Simpson Smith left academia for a chance to write her own story—a luminous Revolutionary War novel set to be the debut of the year. By Megan O’Grady. Photographed by Annemarieke van Drimmelen.

C

oastlines are so evocative,” says Katy Simpson Smith, walking along Bayou St. John, the waterway through which Native Americans first guided Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, New Orleans’s founder, in 1699—and where 2014’s most buzzed-about debut author takes breaks from writing, dangling her feet in. “It’s this marshy, mucky territory; you don’t know where the land stops and where the sea begins. And the water itself is always changing: It can be beautiful, and it can also be threatening.”

Lively and warm, with enormous lake-blue eyes that don’t miss a thing, the 28-year-old author and historian has a vibrant sense of the past and the landscapes and stories that connect us to it. Due out next month, her first novel, *The Story of Land and Sea* (Harper), sparked a bidding war among ten publishing houses before becoming the talk of the Frankfurt Book Fair. And no wonder: It’s not only among the most assured debut novels in recent memory, it heralds the birth of a major new talent. Set in the coastal town of Beaufort, North Carolina, at the twilight of the Revolutionary War, it follows three generations of men and women whose



YOUNG AMERICAN

The author, wearing Thakoon, photographed in New Orleans's French Quarter. Her novel, *The Story of Land and Sea*, will be published next month by Harper. Hair, Edward Lampley for Bumble and Bumble; makeup, Asami Taguchi. Set design, Mark Hannibal. Photographed at the Soniat House hotel. Details, see In This Issue.

Sittings Editor:
Sara Moonves.



terra firma is crumbling. Rebellion is in the air, allegiances are blurred, and life has a seize-the-day precariousness.

At the center of the novel's filigree of relationships are Helen, the daughter of a widowed plantation owner, and Moll, the slave girl she's given on her tenth birthday. What begins as a kind of friendship turns fraught when they come of age and Moll is forced to marry, with Helen rationalizing her father's decision. "The lives around her are mapped by a higher hand, and she has learned to trust this," Helen thinks. "If she began now to doubt, if she studied unhappiness rather than duty, she might find her own life vulnerable." But Helen's faith is shaken as she runs up against the limitations of her own fate—and falls in love with a pirate-soldier. Defying her father, she abandons the plantation for a riskier life at sea.

"What fascinates me is that it's such a time of uncertainty," says Smith, back at her Creole cottage apartment shaded by oaks and palmettos, a plush cat named Eudora circling her protectively. "These are people who don't know how their lives are going to turn out. They're forging a new country and moving away from a style of life they had always been used to. And so that leaves a lot of room for the novelist to step in and present them with possibilities."

Father and daughter, master and slave, man and woman—Smith maps out volatile psychic terrain in a series of pairings, the terms of which are under siege. As British soldiers occupy Beaufort, Helen, who has been taken prisoner on a British ship, jumps overboard in a bid for freedom. "She clings to the sharp barnacled hull until she is sure the ship is silent, and then she sets out, one arm in front of the other, shivering in the cold water of early April, toward the glowing stroke of sand." In a starlit passage that encapsulates the novel's purity of language and elemental beauty, she swims on to a destiny of her own choosing.

The daughter of professors, Smith grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, reading Tolstoy and Faulkner and writing stories on her father's typewriter; she left for college at sixteen and after a brief flirtation with a career in Hollywood, embarked on a doctorate in history. "It was about the thrill of finding the stories in real people's lives and reading these old documents that someone had actually written," Smith explains. She was on a road trip down the North Carolina coast when she happened upon Beaufort and its eighteenth-century graveyard, filled with curiosities: a man buried standing up, saluting the queen; a mass grave for a shipwrecked crew; a wooden marker inscribed *LITTLE GIRL BURIED IN RUM KEG*. That nameless little girl became the seedling of inspiration for Smith's novel—and prompted her declaration of independence from academia. "Being in grad school for five years really made me understand what I needed as a storyteller. It was about emotion, and you can't really get into emotion as a historian." She broke the news to her parents and enrolled in Bennington's creative-writing program.

"These are people who are forging a new country," Smith says. "That leaves a lot of room for the novelist to step in and present them with possibilities"

It was there, while studying with Paul Yoon, that Smith found herself exploring an exhilarating frontier territory between fact and fiction. "What sets her apart for me," says Yoon, "is this amazing balance. On the one hand you have someone whose fiction feels so vast and epic—in both geography and time—and yet she's tackling all this in an almost minimalistic way, where everything feels pared down to the essentials. I love how her work feels at once like a perfect box and an open field."

Smith's literary touchstones are wide-ranging: George Eliot and Edward P. Jones, Toni Morrison and Fanny Burney, that bawdy eighteenth-century precursor to Jane Austen. But it's Marilynne Robinson she merits comparison to, with her interest in fate and faith in American lives. Thanks to Hilary Mantel, with whom Smith shares a talent for collapsing time, there's fresh critical respect for historical fiction. But with an intellectual authority astonishing in such a young author,

Smith brings something else to the table: a keen awareness of what history doesn't tell us. For her dissertation on motherhood, she read every slave narrative written between 1750 and 1850 that she could; very few of them, however, were by women. "I had reams of letters and diaries from white women describing their emotions. But all I had for the slave women were the male slaves' recollections of their mothers—glimpses of love and affection remembered from a young age—and plantation ledgers, which describe a very wide range of what a female slave would have experienced based on the relative kindness of her owner. It is definitely within the realm of possibility that

a woman like Moll existed, but her voice isn't out there."

Moll's voice—and the book's themes of agency and redemption—comes powerfully to the fore after her son is dispatched to the Western Territories and she takes matters into her own hands. When I ask Smith if she had qualms about inhabiting the mind-set of an eighteenth-century black slave, Smith doesn't hesitate: "Yes, you're speaking for another kind of experience, and that sometimes can feel irresponsible. And yet, if you don't speak for that kind of experience, then it's absent altogether, and that's even more irresponsible." That sense of absence has propelled Smith into a second novel, in which her protagonists are white, black, and Native American. "I have to show early America for what it is. And it's not a white America. It's a very blended America."

Later, over a classic Big Easy dinner—she's prepared red beans and rice and okra, followed by mango freeze, a nod to Jazz Fest raging down the street—time seems to collapse once more: The conversation turns first to cinema (she admires Terrence Malick's *The New World* and Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, films that share her provocatively unboundaried view of history) and then to the seminar of freshman women she teaches at Tulane, a new generation of renegade daughters coming into their own. Before I go, she gives me a tour of her mantelpiece, which is laden with private mementos: feathers, photos, King Cake babies, a seashell from the gravesite of the little girl buried in the rum keg—and an image of Tolstoy on a Dodgers baseball card. "It's a long story," she says. □

TEA AND SYMPATHY

In this exclusive excerpt from *The Story of Land and Sea*, a young woman named Helen attends a social gathering with unexpected consequences.

MRS. EASTON, THE COLONEL'S MOTHER, ENLISTS the eligible young women of Beaufort to provide decorations for a welcoming tea for the Beaufort soldiers. Helen brings rose mallow and yellow tickseed, feeling bridal. She is well aware of her father's gentle scheming but has no plans for conquest. Her passions are not yet directed toward love.

The soldiers arrive in a group and stand stiffly. Bows are exchanged. Moll and another girl serve cakes and berries with averted eyes. Helen believes that her conversations with Moll are becoming less welcome, and when the slave passes her with a pitcher of lemonade, Helen pinches her on the leg. Moll slaps at her hand.

"Is it time for a song?" Mrs. Easton asks. She is small and topped with tight gray curls. "Eliza? Helen?"

Helen demurs, and so must listen to Eliza, a former schoolmate, bang out a hornpipe on the harpsichord. Helen is perched on a low chaise by the window and can angle her head toward the day outside while appearing contemplative. During the applause for Eliza, a young man standing behind Helen leans down and says, "Lovely." She nods without turning to look at him. The skin on the back of her legs goes cold.

As the entertainment progresses, Helen takes her turn and plays a slow piece by Scarlatti, inspecting the men in the corner behind the chaise. Young men look alike to her, and the artificiality of this gathering makes her wary. She has been conditioned to solitude. Even if she found a man to love—in the way that love is usually described—she doesn't know that she could enjoy it. Perhaps she wouldn't have understood this if she hadn't been placed on a harpsichord bench in a room full of men and women, their hands twitching with the hope of the unexpected, but here she is, a girl who thinks in increasingly small orbits, thrust into a miniature of the world. She has no plans; she only knows that home, crop, and God are not plan enough.

Much later, Helen finds her way back to the chaise in the parlor. She is waiting to walk home with Moll and ask her what it's like to be married. What are the mysteries? Though of course there was no choice. Any fear that Helen has, Moll must have had too. If she were better at admitting fault, she would feel some guilt in this. What is a life without the ability to choose? This over that; him, or not him. Moll's life is not so distant from Moll's death.

A man sits down beside her. He looks like any other soldier. He speaks to her in a calm, low voice, like a man to a horse. "William Dennis says he's to be your husband."

"Not so at all," she says.

"The bride of Dennis," he says, "who launched a thousand ships."

She stands. She wants to be indignant. "You're a bit fine-read for a soldier."

"Got my start on Goodrich's boat. A rather literary man."

A SIMPLE TUNE

An 18th-century woman often entertained guests with music, as in this portrait by Pavel Andreevich Fedotov.



"The pirate?" she asks. "And you dare stand among American men?"

He rises from the sofa and looks at her with his head to one side. Helen is caught between curiosity and shame. "I'll bring you to sail one day. Wherever you like."

She shakes her head. "I get seasick."

"Are you afraid?"

His eyes grow deeper the longer she looks at them. "I can't swim," she says.

"So say the faint of heart." He turns toward the door and gathers his cap from the hall stand. Helen follows him. Through the open door, they can hear Mrs. Easton's noisy farewells. Helen puts out her hand to stop him. It is almost night, and she can still see him perfectly. He waits, her hand almost on his arm.

From The Story of Land and Sea by Katy Simpson Smith. Copyright © 2014 by Katy Simpson Smith. Reprinted courtesy of Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.