

BOOKS

Altered States Among the Shakers

Rachel Urquhart's debut novel is a historical mystery set in a strict religious community

By Ellen Gamerman

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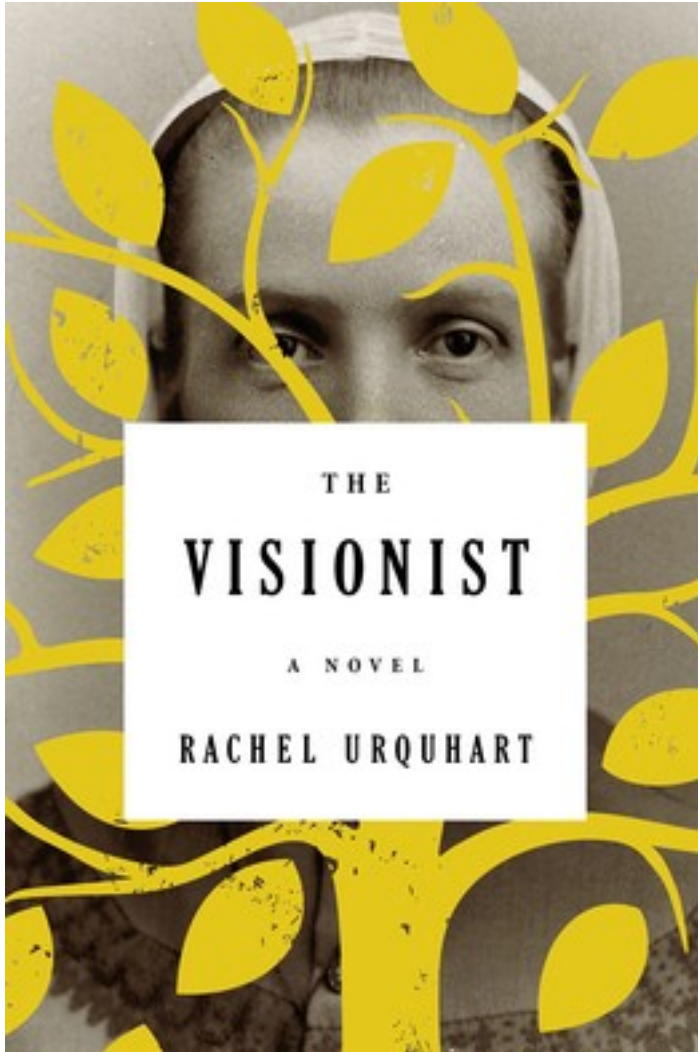
SECT PIECE Rachel Urquhart's debut novel is set in a Shaker community.
Noah Rabinowitz for The Wall Street Journal

Two days before Rachel Urquhart was supposed to deliver the first draft of her debut novel, "The Visionist," to her agent, her laptop was stolen. Then she learned that her backup drive hadn't saved any of her work. After more than three years of writing, she had to start all over again.

"It was just kind of heartbreaking," she says. "But it was a defining moment for me because it showed me I was far more determined about getting this book out than I ever would have thought."

More than five years since that computer debacle, her period novel set in an 1840s Shaker community is set to publish next week. The book focuses on a chapter of Shaker history when a spate of young women known as "visionists" claimed to have mystical experiences and began speaking in tongues, a phenomenon that turned them into quasi-celebrities and brought new believers to the religious sect.

The book revolves around Polly Kimball, a 15-year-old farm girl who is raped by her father and sets fire to his bedroom before taking refuge in a Shaker community. Once she reaches the fictional Massachusetts settlement, she falls into hallucinatory states that sound as much like episodes of post-traumatic stress disorder as divine intervention. The narrative switches among Polly, a fire investigator who is searching for her and an ostracized Shaker teenager named Charity who befriends her.



Published Credit: no credit

Ms. Urquhart, a 50-year-old New York native who worked for most of her career as a magazine writer, spent summers as a kid at her family's home in a converted Shaker meetinghouse in Tyringham, Mass. Her grandfather, Sidney Howard, the Oscar-winning screenwriter of "Gone with the Wind," built a farm there to work the land and write.

One significant detail in the book came about by accident. In 2006, shortly after Ms. Urquhart moved with her family from Manhattan to Brooklyn, she was paging through a nursing magazine addressed to the previous resident. On the back page, she saw a picture of a woman from 1891 covered in

paisley-shaped lesions caused by a rare skin condition. "All kinds of things clicked when that happened," she says. She gave the illness to Charity as a physical manifestation of the character's spiritual burdens.

Other than furniture, many people only know Shakers for their vows of celibacy. The sect maintained its ranks by taking in orphans and poor children. But the theme of forbidden sex didn't interest Ms. Urquhart. "It seemed so obvious," she says. Instead, she wanted to explore the other ways Shakers created intimacy and functioned inside a society largely set apart from the world.

The book describes a rigid community where women fastened their hair on the right side before tending to the left—which was considered "the Devil's domain"—and pinned neckerchiefs over their chests to "hide their womanliness," Ms. Urquhart writes. Harsh passages in the novel describe Shakers casting out members for sexual transgressions, attempting to grab land to increase the settlement's power and controlling the minds of young children.

Reagan Arthur, Publisher at Little, Brown and the book's editor, was impressed by the research that went into the novel. "The Shakers really were a fascinating, devout chapter in American history that I didn't know anything about," she says. "I thought Rachel wove that beautifully into this old-fashioned historical mystery." The book has an initial print run of 25,000, pretty standard for a literary first novel.

"By the late 1840s, the Shakers realized the whole phenomenon had gotten a little bit out of control and teenage girls had kind of figured out how to use this power in ways that were not necessarily quite what they had been at the beginning," Ms. Urquhart says. Shaker communities were on the wane by the late 1800s. The only active Shaker community left in the U.S. is a tiny settlement in New Gloucester, Maine.

Michael Graham, director of the museum there, balked when the book was described to him. "I have a personal reluctance to the idea of trying to equate Shaker fiction writing to the actual Shakers themselves," he says, adding that day-to-day life in Shaker communities wasn't so isolated or restrictive. Historical descriptions in the book were fact-checked by Shaker experts including Lesley Herzberg, a curator at Hancock Shaker Village, a living-history museum in Pittsfield, Mass. The most stringent rules described in the book were not widely followed, she says, though she adds that the novel powerfully evoked this period in Shaker history.

Ms. Urquhart says that Shaker visionists sound to her like groups of teen girls and others throughout history who have fallen into sudden altered states—now suspected episodes of mass hysteria—but she can't entirely dismiss such experiences either.

She points to a somewhat supernatural episode in her own life: She and her husband were looking for a water source for the new house they're building on her family's land in Tyringham. The well company they hired couldn't find water close enough to the surface, she says, so she brought in a "dowser," a person who uses a tree branch or other divining rod to locate underground water. Sure enough, she says, the apple-tree bough he used trembled over what turned out to be a huge water supply. "He managed to find water where the well company couldn't," she says. "You can't explain that through science, and yet it was totally convincing."

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