

# H NEW VOICES

**Debut novelists Linda Hamilton, Kayla Hardy, Rebecca Lehmann, and Fiza Saeed McLynn invite readers to enter the worlds they have created from their fascination with past fact and folklore.**



Four main ingredients are layered into Fiza Saeed McLynn's *The Midnight Carousel* (Park Row, 2026/Michael Joseph, 2025): "Love and heartache; 1900 Paris; Jazz Age Chicago; and an enchanting carousel linked to a series of mysterious disappearances."

When she "started counselling the bereaved almost twenty years ago," McLynn says, "it quickly became clear that my clients dealt with grief in wildly different ways. Ten years later, I had the idea of exploring the various coping mechanisms in story form. Always slightly obsessed with amusement parks, I picked a carousel to build the story around as a symbol of life and loss: the movement, the circular motion, the ups and downs."

For McLynn, the ride's history was "fascinating. Carrousel—French for 'little battle'—were royal tournaments in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, developed from the combat training practices of Arabian and Moorish horsemen seven hundred years earlier, in which riders galloped in a circle, trying to spear rings. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, wooden horses had replaced real horses, and the attraction appeared as entertainment at fairs. It makes for an interesting contrast between the fun of the ride and its violent origins, between light and dark, something I've weaved into my novel. Death, World War I, child disappearances, poverty, racism and sexism are balanced by romance, the thrill of carnivals, and the glamour of the 1920s."

With the connection to France, and the fact that McLynn's "story's carousel is groundbreaking, it seemed fitting to begin the novel with the 1900 Paris Exposition, a world's fair showcasing technological innovations," she relates. "But, as someone whose father moved to the UK from south Asia in the 1950s, I was keen to feature the immigrant experience. So, the carousel and my main character, Maisie—a young, British woman—relocate to the USA, an attractive destination for many

people chasing a better future, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century."

It was also important to McLynn that the reader "feels immersed in each location's atmosphere; Paris is dark and brooding; cut off from the mainland of England, Canvey Island conjures a sense of isolation; Chicago bustles as a thriving metropolis—all different, but used to show that the world is small, and, fundamentally, we are the same."

Linda Hamilton's *The Fourth Wife* (Kensington, 2026) is, she explains, "a Gothic horror about a Mormon polygamist family living in a haunted house in 1880s Utah. This story comes from a deep look into Latter-day Saint history, my own ancestors, and the generational trauma of Mormonism."

Hamilton continues: "*The Fourth Wife* also contains little-known folklore and representation of anxiety based on my own experiences. It explores the themes of patriarchy, feminist awakening, religious deconstruction, mental health, and finding your own courage and voice."

In 1872, Hamilton's "3<sup>rd</sup>-great grandfather George Kirkham married Mary Russon in Salt Lake City, Utah Territory," she says. "Three years later, in 1875, George also married Mary's biological sister, Sara. Both sisters remained married to him polygamously for the rest of their lives. George left behind several memoirs but rarely mentioned his wives. Mary and Sara too wrote brief biographies but never discussed their plural marriages.

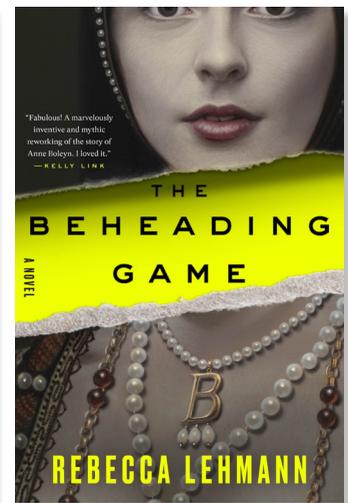
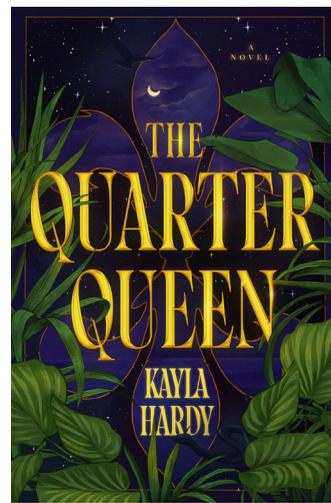
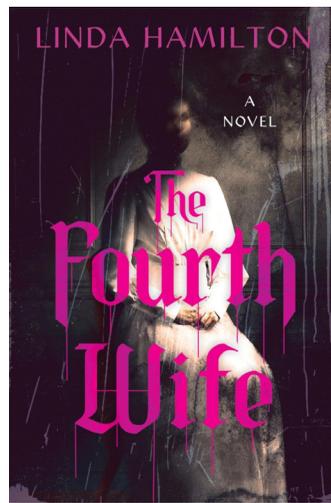
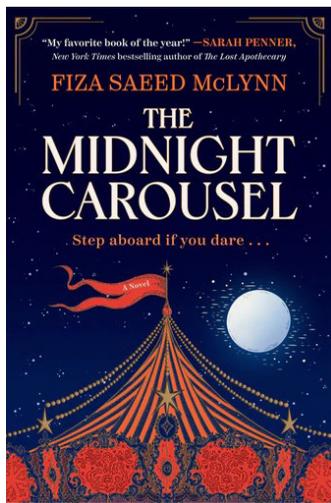
"I was taught growing up that polygamy was a commandment of God and that my ancestors obeyed, even though it was hard. The narrative surrounding it was only told through a faith-promoting lens. It wasn't until I studied the history of polygamy as an adult—the untold stories of abuse, neglect, and poverty—that I realized the stories of my childhood were whitewashed and one-sided. As I wondered what my ancestors' life might have been like, I knew I wanted to write a book about polygamy. I needed to help heal this generational wound within me by giving a voice to the women of the past who were censored or who censored themselves. I also wanted to tell this story as a Gothic because the horrors of ghosts and creepy houses mirror a reality of abusive patriarchy and religious manipulation."

*The Fourth Wife* is seen by Hamilton as "a reckoning with religion, feminism, and the many voices history has left behind."

Kayla Hardy, author of *The Quarter Queen* (Ballantine, 2026) has "always believed words are spells and that writing is, inherently, a strange sort of alchemy," she states. "I owe this sense of magic to my Louisiana Creole heritage. My great-grandmother Willa-Mae Mercer, a Louisiana Creole wrenched from her home down South to the North, was a devout Catholic but also practiced—much to my other family members' chagrin—rootwork," which Hardy explains, "is not uncommon for many Black folks with roots in the South, particularly for those hailing from New Orleans, a city whose very fabric is intertwined in Black spirituality and syncretic religion."

Having spent time as an African-American folklorist and literature scholar, studying the likes of Zora Neale Hurston and Frederick Douglass, for Hardy, "the idea for *The Quarter Queen* began to take shape while I was finishing my Ph.D. in literature and creative writing at Binghamton University, when I was spending a year studying Voodoo in preparation for a research trip back to New Orleans.

"The more I studied Voodoo, the more I felt I was tapping into my own familial history which raised questions of 'how can someone be both



Catholic and a Voodooienne?’ and really, what does that say about the complexity of not just Black identity but about humanity as a whole?”

This led Hardy to the infamous “Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau, and her daughter Marie Laveau II, two of the most powerful Black women to have ever lived in New Orleans. I became obsessed with telling her story and ultimately, found that the way to access the story of Marie Laveau was to center both—mother and daughter. I am of the belief that you cannot understand one without the other, that both Mariés are so deeply enmeshed that their stories should be told together, side by side.”

She believes that “*The Quarter Queen* is a historical novel. But it is also a Black and Creole-centered fantasy whose world unapologetically asserts that not only is magic real, but it was also used as a horrifying tool to classify enslaved peoples into different systems. It is politically charged, full of shifting secretive alliances and star-crossed lovers. It is also a tender mother-daughter reconciliation story at its heart.”

To Hardy, “this is a book that asks us, through Marie Laveau’s journey, what does it mean to hold such fearsome power in your hands in a world that seeks to bind them? Can we rewrite our own fates for the better? Ultimately, *The Quarter Queen* is for the readers who want to do just that.”

*The Beheading Game* (Crown, 2026) by Rebecca Lehmann describes how: “Anne Boleyn is often presented as a scheming seductress, a homewrecker who gets what she deserves when she’s executed on charges of incest, adultery and treason.”

However, even a small amount of research, as Lehmann discovered, “reveals that those charges were probably false, and that she was instead the victim of a legal system designed to deliver whatever verdict was desired by Henry VIII, a Bluebeard-esque king keen to dispose of Anne so he could marry Jane Seymour, which he did eleven days after Anne’s execution, and start trying for the boy neither Anne nor Katherine of Aragon could deliver.”

It was partly because of this that Lehmann wanted to “rewrite Anne’s story,” she says, “so that readers could see the Anne I saw as I researched—not a perfect person, but not the caricature presented across 500 years often biased historical representation. The real Anne was a well-educated polymath, passionate about religious reform, and keen to co-lead England with Henry VIII and usher the Renaissance that she’d witnessed in her decade at the French court into England.”

A bigger question for Lehmann was how to retell the story. “I didn’t

want to do a re-write that circumvented her execution; that would defang the beast of the misogynistic and violent system in which she lived her life. I’d always been fascinated by cephalophore stories, in which characters pick up their heads after beheadings and carry on. One of the most famous is ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,’ from which the novel draws its title (Gawain is a ‘beheading game’ story): the Green Knight is beheaded by Gawain, then picks up his head and promises to return the blow in a year’s time.”

Lehmann also thought about “the story of the headless horseman, popular in America, and of the cephalophore saints, like Saint Denis or Saint Valerie. Why couldn’t Anne have the same fate (she is, after all, considered a martyr by some)? What would happen if she woke up after her execution, sewed her head back on, and went on a revenge quest to kill Henry VIII before he could marry Jane Seymour, thus protecting her own daughter Elizabeth’s claim to the throne?”

The upshot was that Lehmann “couldn’t stop thinking about the idea,” and so, “it became the plot of *The Beheading Game*, which begins with Anne waking up in her makeshift coffin in the Tower of London, beheaded but still alive, and finally getting her chance for justice.”

In Lehmann’s historical fantasy revenge thriller, all becomes possible for Anne after sewing back on her head and teaming up with a fenland-style sidekick despite the challenges she faces.

By showcasing beheaded famous queens, past Voodoo royalty, polygamous marriage and fairground fun, these debut novelists have brought to the readers of historical fiction a wide range of ingredients and perspectives to challenge and entertain.



## WRITTEN BY MYFANWY COOK

Myfanwy creates HF writing and language-related workshops for universities, charities and other organisations. She is currently highlighting the importance of miners and their families who migrated from Devon and the Tamar Valley during the 19th century. myfanwyc@btinternet.com