MYSTERY

"Two years after I sold Dust and Shadow, I was about ready to throw in the towel and become a longshoreman"

INTERROGATION: Lyndsay Faye

BY KIM KANKIEWICZ

Lyndsay Faye's Timothy Wilde series is set in 1840s Manhattan, at the birth of the NYPD. Timothy is a reluctant "copper star" who joins the force after surviving a fire that destroys his home and scars his face. Based on his knack for observation, he is made a detective before there's a name "for hunting down criminals after the fact rather than stopping crimes in progress, as roundsmen do."

Readers met Timothy in The Gods of Gotham *(2012) and watched him gain confidence as a detective in* Seven for a Secret *(2013). Faye's latest novel,* The Fatal Flame, *immerses Timothy in an arson investigation involving corrupt politicians and female factory workers. The final installment in the trilogy,* Flame *features memorable new characters alongside familiar faces: Timothy's brother, Valentine; his detective partner, Jakob Piest; his inamorata, Mercy Underhill; and his nemesis, Silkie Marsh.*

Prior to the Timothy Wilde novels, Faye wrote Dust and Shadow *(2009), a pastiche that pits Sherlock Holmes against Jack the Ripper. Living in Manhattan to pursue an acting career, Faye penned her debut novel after the restaurant where she worked by day was bulldozed.* Dust and Shadow *has been adapted as a stage musical, with industry readings presented in New York City this May.*

Faye took time during her recent book tour to speak with me by phone. We discussed Timothy's journey as a hero, the influence of a theater background on Faye's writing, and Faye's ongoing infatuation with Sherlock Holmes.

Kim: *The Fatal Flame* is the final book in a trilogy. At what point in the writing process did you realize that the Timothy Wilde series would end with the third book?

Lyndsay: It was actually a really painful process, to be honest with you, because I was writing this book that I didn't know if it was the third in a trilogy or if it was the third book in a series of like, ten. And then it hit 150,000 words. I went back through it, and I realized a couple things. One thing was that the three-act structure was kind of ingrained in me from having been an actor. So it just turned into a three-act structure. I also realized that it was a coming-of-age story. To be relatively spoiler-free, fire plays a big role in all three of the books. The fact that by the time *The Fatal Flame* ended Timothy could actually walk into a burning building out of a love of family — that was, to me, very beautiful. Regarding Timothy and Valentine, I don't think previously they had really talked about what had happened to them as children. And when they have that conversation, that scene was also really resonant. It's the place that the brothers are in emotionally at the end of the book that convinced me it was the third in a trilogy.

Kim: It felt satisfying. It felt like a series ending.

Lyndsay: I'm so glad you say that.

Kim: Going back to the role of fire in your books, I'm curious about whether you've had personal experience with fire. How did that become a motif?

Lyndsay: Half of this answer is interesting, and the other half is the most boring thing that you have ever heard. The interesting part is that I have PTSD problems because I had a bad accident when I was six years old, so I know what panic attacks look like. I was squished in an elevator shaft.

Kim: Oh my gosh.

Lyndsay: I'm lucky to be alive. I had seventy stitches on the back of my head.

Kim: Whoa.

Lyndsay: So the interesting part is that I know what it feels like to freak out. The other part was in the year 1845, when the NYPD was founded, three hundred buildings burned down. Six million dollars' worth of property damage. This is in 1845, right? That's an astronomical figure. The whole downtown was just burned. I thought, what could be a more dramatic circumstance than putting your hero right in the middle of that event? The scarred, damaged but stalwart hero is something that I just poached from the zeitgeist. I thought, okay, he's in this real historical fire. He's been fire scarred. Since he's fire scarred, he cannot return to his job bartending. Since he cannot return to his job bartending, he has to take this job from his brother, whom he thinks hates him and whom he hates almost equally.

Kim: Right.

Lyndsay: In *The Fatal Flame*, the reason there's so much fire going on is because I'm a terrible person. Every time I love a character I'm like, w*hat's the worst thing I could do to them?* So when I thought to myself, w*hat's the worst thing I could do to Timothy investigating a crime that has to do with seam*stresses? I thought, a*rson. He would hate that.* I don't mean to be glib about it because it was very painful to write. I just think it's better storytelling if the stakes are very high. And it was so satisfying to me to see him grow up to the point that he can follow his brother into a burning building.

Kim: We seem to be really interested in antiheroes right now, and Timothy is such an unabashedly heroic character. He's a feminist and an abolitionist. You've said that some people consider him too progressive for his time period. How do you respond?

Lyndsay: Occasionally people ascribe his better qualities to me being a self-described activist, feminist, all these things. And of course he's a product of me and my imagination. But additionally, I read a lot of diaries and a lot of newspapers from the time period. And I wonder who people think were actually running things like the Underground Railroad at the time. Like it's impossible to have this person who is trying to do what's right. I think that's deeply cynical, and I also think it's rather smug.

People in the modern day like to think they have the market cornered on virtue. And they're just wrong. People have always existed who were for some reason altruistic. I think writing about a hero is interesting. At the same time, people don't notice other things about Timothy that are not heroic at all because he's got such good intentions. He never laughs once in any of the three books.

Kim: I never noticed that.

Lyndsay: Not a single time. He is also really angry. He starts drinking at about six or seven in the morning. He loves his brother more than anything, but he's terrible to his brother. And when I try to explain that to people, they often don't believe me because his intentions are so good. They don't necessarily notice the fact that he's just as bad as the rest of us.

Kim: I think he seems like such a hero because he devotes himself to causes bigger than himself.

Lyndsay: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Ever since I was a little girl, those were the stories that I wanted to read over and over again. The ones about: *I have two choices to make. One of them would be quite selfish and one of them would be for* ***you***. I always think that second choice is fascinating. How do you get there? What is the motivation for that? And self-sacrifice is one of the most beautiful things ever. Self-sacrifice is one of those things you put in to balance out all of the terrible stuff going on in the rest of the plot.

Kim: You've mentioned a couple ways that your acting background affects your writing process. Can you talk about other ways that acting influences the way you write?

Lyndsay: Hmm. Dialect. I'm trained in a number of dialects. I can do maybe four British accents, two Irish accents, Australian, three different versions of Southern, Scottish. If you're trained as a mimic, reproducing vocabulary on the page is much easier.

Kim: Do you do the dialects when you're reading at author appearances?

Lyndsay: Sometimes I do. It sounds slightly ridiculous if it's in a male voice. But there's a musical version of my first novel, *Dust and Shadow*. For the readings where we were fixing the script, I was doing like, ninety accents.

Kim: I was going to ask you about the musical. Can you talk about the music they [Jonathan Reid Gealt and Dustin Sullivan] composed? How does it enhance the story and add dimension to the characters?

Lyndsay: We had conversations from the get-go that this had to be dark. You're not going to do a Sherlock Holmes-Jack the Ripper musical and start singing, "Consider yourself at home!" So, you know, it's much more…Sondheim. There's a song in the musical called "It's Obvious," where Holmes is emotionally disturbed about the fact that he can't solve the case quickly enough. The song is a giant chorus number of everyone in London essentially coming up to him and saying, "It's me. I did it." You can tell very quickly that it's all in his head. He's seeing too many clues. The whole number is this crescendoing *it was me, it was me, it was me.* And it's touching because it shows that he's not quite getting there, and he feels the threat of London turning against him. Because part of what he's trying to save is not just the women of Whitechapel, but London itself. Musically, that's a highlight for sure.

Kim: That sounds really good.

Lyndsay: There's a classic "I want" song at the beginning, which instead of belonging to a Disney princess belongs to Sherlock Holmes. It's called "It's All Just a Little Too Easy." He's like, "Why is everything so easy? Just give me a case that's hard." There's a lot of compassion in the musical. *Dust and Shadow* is about Sherlock Holmes loving London and loving his best friend, and his best friend saying, "I will be there next to you no matter how much risk." I think musicals about friendship are much more important than musicals about murder, personally.

Kim: Will people be able to see this musical widely at some point?

Lyndsay: I'm hoping so. They just did a reading for producers. We have no control over that, but I hope so.

Kim: You've said that when you wrote the novel *Dust and Shadow*, your goals were pretty modest regarding publication. And then it got published by Simon & Schuster. Once that bar was set, how did that affect your subsequent writing?

Lyndsay: To be honest with you, it did not go very well. I wrote *Dust and Shadow* because I loved those characters. I wanted to read the Caleb Carr version of Sherlock Holmes solving the Jack the Ripper murders. Since it didn't exist, I decided to write it myself, which was an act of enormous hubris. And then it gets published and I write two more novels, neither of which are worth a damn. Simon & Schuster wouldn't pick me up again because *Dust and Shadow*, despite the fact that it was fairly well received, sold like turd sandwiches.

Two years after I sold *Dust and Shadow*, I was about ready to throw in the towel and become a longshoreman. My lovely husband just kept encouraging me and saying, you're going to be fine. It's just not working right now, but it's going to work. Then I came up with the very high concept proposal: Day One, Cop One of the NYPD. I had five chapters [of *The Gods of Gotham*] when I met my agent, Erin Malone. She shakes my hand and says, "I have one question. What happens next?" And I was like, "Oh. That's a nice question." But selling *Dust and Shadow* led to a very big learning curve of figuring out my craft. It was not easier after I had written it.

Kim: And what are you working on now that you've completed the Timothy Wilde trilogy?

Lyndsay: I have a standalone coming out in April of 2016. It's called *Jane Steele*. Jane Steele is a gigantic fan of *Jane Eyre*, when it first came out in the 1850s. Jane Eyre, in the classic novel, is often told that she is irredeemable, she's wicked, she's evil, she's irretrievably bad. Because she has her own moral compass, she says to people continually, "I know I'm a good person. I know that I'm doing the right thing." But I thought, what if somebody had been told they were wicked and irredeemable for their entire lives and instead of saying, "I know I'm a good person," what if they said, "Yeah, I could own that?" So it's a mashup of *Jane Eyre* and *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*. Jane Steele is a serial killer, but the kind of serial killer where you're like, oh, that guy needed killing. It's a lot about identity and morality and the nature of lies. The last line of the prologue is *Reader, I murdered him.*

Kim: That sounds highly entertaining.

Lyndsay: Thank you. It's my first female narrator, so that was fun to explore.

Kim: Okay, last question. The picture at the top of your Twitter feed cracks me up. You're at a table of women seated behind microphones, and everybody is laughing. What's going on in that picture?

Lyndsay: It's the podcast I'm a part of, the **Baker Street Babes.** We're the internet's only all-female Sherlock Holmes podcast.

Kim: Cool!

Lyndsay: We were nominated for a Shorty Award last year. We lost out to *This American Life*, but they're okay.

Kim: Good company to be in.

Lyndsay: Yeah, we forgive them. We're totally dorky, nerdy people interviewing Sherlock Holmes actors and writers. But we do actually know what we're talking about. In fact, Ashley [Polasek], one of our group, is I think the world's only PhD holder in Sherolockian film. Sherlock Holmes film has existed pretty much since film was invented. The Baker Street Babes have had a bunch of very cool episodes recently with people who have been appearing in the new Sherlock Holmes material: Lars Mikkelsen, Rupert Graves, Lara Pulver — people from the BBC series. We've interviewed [Sherlockian writers] Leslie Klinger and Laurie R. King, among many other people. We're just a bunch of girls who sit around giggling and talking about Sherlock Holmes.

Image of Lyndsay Faye courtesy Gabriel Lehner

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