

## Asheville's Kostova offers inspiration at Cullowhee literary fest

Written by

**Rob Neufeld**  
NEUFELD ON BOOKS

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Elizabeth Kostova's Dracula-tracking novel, "The Historian," has been an inspiration for Western Carolina University students this semester and is the subject of a keynote event at the university's Spring Literary Festival, April 3-7.

An author show with Kostova kicks off the festival at 7:30 p.m. April 3. The program is open to the public and will be webcast live on **CITIZEN-TIMES.com**.

"I'm a very curious person," says Shannon Reckler, a WCU sophomore who relates to Kostova's heroine. "So I don't know if I could resist the temptation to go on a journey like that."

By that, she means, the heroine's search across 12 countries for a father who'd gone missing while pursuing the trail of Vlad III, a 15th-century Romanian tyrant, aka Dracula.

It also means the search that Paul, the father, had told stories about — when he and his English professor's Romanian

daughter, Helen Rossi, made their own father-saving, Dracula-hunting quest.

In Professor Sandra Saunders' class (Popular Literature and Culture), Reckler says, "We discussed the reversal of the Gothic heroine. In 'The Historian' as well as in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula,' the women almost have to save the men."

### Fiction's reflection of self

It's not surprising that one of the books that changed Kostova's life had been about a woman testing her strength — "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Brontë. Kostova was 14 when she read it.

"When I read 'Jane Eyre,' I realized a few things," Kostova said in a recent interview with the Citizen-Times. "One was that it had been written by a woman. That was incredible to me, because I had interest already in becoming a writer. ...

"So I felt very close to this woman, whoever

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she was long ago, who'd written a book about a character something like herself, and made up this huge story.

"But the other thing I experienced," Kostova said, "was being allowed into these lives that were dramatic and rather dark and adult. For the first time, I had a feeling beyond the feeling of reading childhood adventures. I was thinking: This is almost like being best friends with this character."

Margi Fisher, also a student in Saunders' class, relates to Helen Rossi in "The Historian."

"I think she's strong, independent and contrasts sharply to the cowering, demure female leads you often find in these kinds of novels," Fisher says.

"She has had a history of feeling rejected by a member of her family. ... That rejection I think has given her the drive to prove herself worthy through her academic and personal accomplishments, much like I feel driven to prove myself to my family through my writing."

There are some writers in Saunders' class. Reckler has nearly completed the first novel in a fantasy series titled "Be Still the Night." In each book, one of a group of women empowered by the goddess Athena confronts her fate, which involves being mated to a demigod, human or human monster.

## Reflections on history

For WCU sophomore Britt Hanna, it was the interpretation of history that most impressed her in "The Historian." She saw how vampire stories varied around the world.

"In the United States, we have the mingling of different cultures," she said. "So, why couldn't we have the mingling of humans and vampires?"

That's the theme of the "Twilight" novels. But "In 'The Historian,'" she notes, "Dracula is not someone you want to mingle with. ... In Eastern cultures, such as Transylvania, they have a particular folklore, and they don't want to mingle with vampires. In Western culture, they want to see what's going on."

Hanna, a future occupational therapist, puts her finger on the sore spot that animates Dracula in "The Historian." At the heart of the myth is a deadly clash — a nonmingling — between the urban, imperial Turks and the mountain people to the north who had incorporated terror into

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their defense strategy.

The potency of the myth marks the region, and puts the western cultures around it in another sphere.

“There is something vastly mysterious for me,” the heroine's father, Paul, relates about a trip from Istanbul to Budapest, “about the shift one sees, along that route, from the Islamic world to the Christian, from the Ottoman to the Austro-Hungarian. ... Little by little you begin to believe you can read in nature itself the saturation of history.”

“The Balkans,” Kostova said, about the area through which Paul passed, “is fascinating to me because it was the crossroads between Europe and the Middle East. It's where Islam and Christianity were most deeply mingled in history.”

Now, she says the region is “like a fly in amber. ... When you go there, still, in spite of modernization, you feel a much older world than you feel in Western Europe. Western Europe often feels to me more like a museum, and Eastern Europe feels like the old world.”

## The matter of character

In “The Historian,” Paul says about his trip to Bucharest and his meeting with Helen's memorable Aunt Éva that she was “someone my memory and imagination have conspired to preserve in living color for 20 years. I have sometimes used her to fill the shoes of characters in books, or

figures in history; for example, she stepped in automatically when I encountered Madame Merle, the personable schemer in Henry James's ‘Portrait of a Lady.’”

Understanding historical characters is a passion for WCU senior Clarissa Anne Dellinger, a professional writing program student. She has read “The Historian” twice now.

Assigned reading in high school hadn't engaged her. Reading Anne Rice's “Vampire Chronicles” on her own did.

“The Historian,” she says, “has its own twist. It brings the Bram Stoker legend and the actual history of Vlad Drakul, the Wallachian prince, and meshes them together, which makes it interesting for me. I'm very interested in learning about the prince. ... He's a real person. Well, what type of person was he?”

Henry James was more Kostova's guide than Stoker in shaping her interests. She

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therefore provides a link for readers of vampire stories. If they were to follow her to her second novel, "The Swan Thieves," they'd find modern psychological characters engaged in obsessions with art and love.

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## LEARN MORE

- To see more features about Elizabeth Kostova, visit The Read on WNC at <http://TheReadonWNC.ning.com>.

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- The WCU Spring Literary Festival kicks off at 7:30 p.m. April 3 with a live webcast with Elizabeth Kostova talking about her novel "The Historian." The event will be in Illusions, University Center, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee. The following four days feature nine programs and many renowned authors. To learn more, call 227-7264 or visit [www.litfestival.org](http://www.litfestival.org).

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