

**Karen White Talks About the House at the Heart of
THE STRANGERS ON MONTAGU STREET...**

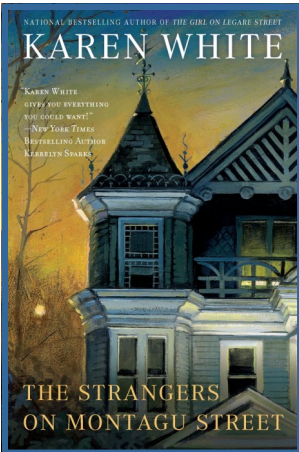


What was your inspiration for putting a dollhouse at the center of The Strangers on Montagu Street? Did you have a dollhouse when you were a child?

I had an inexpensive cardboard dollhouse but was horribly jealous of my friend's Victorian handmade wooden dollhouse! As I grew older, I began to classify dollhouses in the same category as clowns: creepy! And grist for a good ghost story!

Melanie and Jack discuss searching for the house replicated by the dollhouse and note that over time many owners made changes to modernize their homes. Greek Revivals became Victorians, etc. Was that common? At what point did preservationists influence what could be changed on Charleston's historic homes?

Amazingly, renovating your house was quite fashionable back in the day. Our ancestors were a frugal lot and it made more economic sense to renovate instead of tear down and rebuild. People didn't move around frequently, so staying in the same town was common—but that didn't mean that your residence couldn't keep up with the going fashion. The Montagu Street house was a challenge to track down because it, too, had been "updated." Luckily, preservationists did step forward—but not until it was too late for some homes in the historical districts.



Jack talks about a miniature sideboard with diamond-shaped inlays on what appears to be mahogany. The inlay design is characteristic of Robert Wood, a cabinetmaker from Scotland. He had a shop in Charleston and today his furniture is very rare and very valuable. Did Wood actually exist? And did he make some miniatures?

Yes, Robert Wood did exist! Since Jack's parents own an antique store on King Street, I figured I needed to be knowledgeable about the subject and I have several terrific books about furniture—which is how I discovered that particular piece and Mr. Wood (perfect name, isn't it?). I have no idea if he made miniatures—that's called "artistic license."

Nola, her mother, Melanie's mother Ginny, Julia Manigault and her brother William are all musically gifted—extremely so. Are you? Music influences the direction of your plot. The radio plays without warning. The dollhouse piano is an actual working miniature. What is being conveyed by the emphasis on music? Can you share the subtext without giving away any spoilers?

My mother was a music major in college (she played the piano and the alto sax(!)) and I grew up playing the piano and singing (and still do both). Music has been a huge part of my life and I was so excited to use it in a book! There is a genetic link with artistic gifts, and I thought the music one would be a great connection among the characters. Like all artists, musicians share a connection whether or not they're related. And whether or not they're living or dead.

The ceiling of the porch on Montagu Street is described as "haint blue." What's that about?

A "haint" is a ghost—and African slaves began the tradition of painting porch ceilings a light blue to scare away ghosts and spirits. People also say that it will deter bees and birds from building nests on one's porch because they think it's the sky—but from personal observation, that's not true!

Have you been places that are supposedly haunted? Do you know people who claim to have seen ghosts?

I'm a glutton for punishment and when traveling, I always opt for the "haunted room" in an inn or castle. Last year in Scotland, my son and husband (thankfully, not me) witnessed a vase hurled across the room in front of them. We were staying at a reputedly haunted 14th century castle near the Culloden Battlefield. I can honestly say that was the first night I've ever slept with both eyes open.

Melanie's ability to see ghosts seems more powerful than in previous Tradd Street novels. Is that because she's now accepted her "gift?"

Yes, definitely. In the beginning, she saw her ability solely as a curse. With her mother around, she's become more accepting, and has also just begun to appreciate her ability to help others through her unusual gift.

Is this the first time you've written about spirits possessing inanimate objects?

Yes—but it might not be my last!

When is your next book out?

I'm returning to coastal Georgia for SEA CHANGE, which is set on St. Simons Island and will be published in June 2012.

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