



## Seance in Sepia

*Michelle Black*

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## Seance in Sepia Michelle Black

When the price of an unusual picture called a spirit photograph, which some Victorian spiritualists claimed was a photograph of the departed taken during a seance, sells at auction for over a thousand dollars, Flynn Keirnan is determined to discover the story behind it. She soon learns the ghostly images of the woman and two men in the picture were the subjects of a sensational murder trial in 1875 Chicago.

A young architect was accused of killing his wife and best friend in what the local press dubbed The Free Love Murders. Flynn tracks the story through many sources, including the trial transcript, a journal kept by one of the victims, and notes from a jailhouse interview with the husband conducted by feminist firebrand Victoria Woodhull for her radical newspaper.

Woodhull, also known as a spiritualist, was asked by the accused to contact the spirits of his wife and friend to obtain details about the deaths. Was it a double homicide, a double suicide, or a murder-suicide and, if so, who killed whom?

Flynn Keirnan discovers the key to solving the Free Love murders lies in learning the provenance of the photograph itself. When she does she finds that, like Victoria, her own outlook on love has changed.

## Seance in Sepia Details

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Author : Michelle Black

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## From Reader Review Séance in Sepia for online ebook

### Warren Bull says

The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” – L. P. Hartley

In Séance in Sepia, the sixth novel of historical suspense by author Michelle Black, the author skillfully guides the reader through a world both like and unlike our own. Most of us are not well acquainted with spiritualism, séances and spirit photography but we are all only too well acquainted with loss, love, jealousy and trust that drive the vivid characters in this novel just as surely as they drive us today.

When Flynn Keirnan buys an unusual photograph at an estate sale, an antique dealer suggests it might be a “spirit photograph” dating from just after the American Civil War. At auction the photo attracts so many bids and so much attention that she becomes intrigued to discover the history of the photo before it is sold. Discovering the ghostly images of two men and a woman who were involved in a murder described by the local Chicago press as a “Prairie Avenue Massacre” and the “The Free Love Murders” makes Flynn even more determined to uncover hidden truths, both past and, unexpectedly, in the present.

In addition to giving the reader an engaging mystery, knife-edged suspense and a telling glimpse into post-Civil War American society, Ms. Black presents a fascinating portrait of spiritualist, radical feminist and free love advocate Victoria Woodhull, one of the most admired and despised women of her generation. This is an exceptional book.

Published by Five Star Books scheduled to be released in October, 2011

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### Barb says

This was such fun, the mystery was really good but I also loved the characters and the story had so many things that appeal to my tastes.

Flynn Keirnan's, father owns a used book store and she goes to estate sales looking for treasures for him. On one of these trips she finds an antique photo that has a really interesting image of three people and learns it's a spirit photo taken before the turn of the century when Spiritualism was at its height.

Flynn is intrigued by the photo and begins to learn more about it. As she does we are taken back to 1875 when the subjects of the photograph were alive. The woman in the center of the image was murdered as was the fair hair man in the photo, the husband also pictured was charged with their deaths.

Black weaves in some really interesting social history including the Oneida community in Upstate New York, Victoria Woodhull the famous suffragist and proponent of 'free love' and first female candidate for president, and Anthony Comstock, who created the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice.

I enjoyed both the historical and contemporary storylines, I really enjoyed the mystery, I liked the way the author chose to reveal the relationships between the historical characters and the way she included all the interesting history. This was just a great fit for me. The only thing that I was completely happy with was the reader, whose voice was sometimes stiff and stilted. But the majority of the reading was well done and the

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story was so engaging it was easy to overlook.

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### **Allison says**

I was hoping for more out of this title because I loved Black's *An Uncommon Enemy*. All the elements were there for a great story: intertwined past and present stories; Victorian customs; seances; and spirit photography, but it just didn't mesh for me.

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### **Heidi says**

I bought this book because of the Victorian occult angle, and because in the first chapter a modern day woman finds a so-called "spirit photograph" at an estate sale, and that was intriguing. But in the end I was not taken with any of the characters and thought the jumping around between past and present, not to mention the various characters, made for a disjointed narrative.

It had almost a self-published amateurishness to it. For instance, at one point our protagonist is talking to a young man who claims he was raised to be fluent in French. "Comme sa va?""Ca va bien, merci," he shot back, now smiling. "Et tu?" For anyone who knows French there are so many mistakes in these two sentences I had to laugh. "Sa" should be "ca." (She got it right in the retort.) "Comme" should be "Comment." And "tu" should be "toi." All that was needed was to run this exchange by a true French speaker – but apparently no one bothered.

In a section that takes place in the past, a character writes: "The more he thought about it... The more he began to suspect that she may have staged the attempt." Nowadays people say "MAY have" for the past tense, but in those times it would always have been "she might have."

On page 158, "Sexual relations between my wife and I increased in frequency" should be "Sexual relations between my wife and me".

Small things, but they all added to my sense of shoddy editing.

And as I said, the characters didn't come to life. The one I liked best, and who seemed most authentic, was the real-life Victoria Woodhull. The rest seemed cardboard, put there to serve the story, not to drive it. If characters don't work for me, the novel doesn't work. Two stars.

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### **Marguerite Czajka says**

Interesting, but a little slow.

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### **MaryannC.Book Fiend says**

3.5 Stars Torn at bumping this up to 3.75 starts, but I will leave it stand. For the most part I liked this

Victorian mystery coupled with a contemporary storyline about a young woman Flynn, who happens to come across an eerie photograph of 3 people who were once involved in a love triangle/murder back in Chicago 1875. This kept me interested throughout and the storyline of Flynn searching for answers about these 3 people was riveting there is also an appearance of famed Suffragette, Victoria Woodhull woven into the storyline itself.

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### **Lisa says**

This was an interesting mystery plot -- but it was a little convoluted and at times confusion in its presentation.

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### **Phair says**

Can't say I really liked this one. I found the back & forth between present & past didn't work especially well. I particularly disliked being hard-pressed to figure out if the story was being told as it happened in the past or if it was coming from the so-called journal or novel that was discovered or maybe some of both. As I said, confusing. We have the present day character's story mirrored in the novel by her former employer/lover then we have the past story coming to light thru the journal/novel--too many wheels within wheels for me.

I did enjoy learning a bit more about Victoria Woodhull, the Oneida group and the spiritualist movement. Sadly, while this novel brought up much that was interesting the overall effect of *Séance in Sepia* was merely OK. I have enjoyed Black's other books, especially *An Uncommon Enemy*.

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### **Carol Crigger says**

Good plot, good characters. I believe Ms Black has an excellent feel for the Victorian era, with all the conflict Victorians felt toward sex and their sometimes strange attraction to the occult. Oh, yes, the novel is a murder mystery, but it all connects. Enjoyed this one very much.

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### **Lizzie Hayes says**

‘Séance in Sepia’ by Michelle Black  
Published by Five Star Publishing, October 2011. ISBN: 978-1-4328-2548-5

Flynn Keirnan has taken time off from her teaching job to help her father get his second-hand bookshop off the ground. Sorting through a dusty collection of books belonging to a deceased lady, now being sold off by the landlady to cover unpaid rent, Flynn finds tucked in one of the books what is clearly a Victorian photograph. Although the photograph is that of dark haired young women, the transparent faces of two men float above on either side of her. Flynn is fascinated by the photograph which on investigation she discovers to be a ‘spirit’ photograph, which was a claim made by some Victorian spiritualists that they could photograph the dead during a séance. Flynn becomes even more fascinated when she puts it up on the auction house EBay and the bidding rises to \$2000.

Intrigued by the photograph Flynn conducts some investigation and discovers that the people in the photograph were the subjects in a murder trial in Chicago in 1875, when an architect was accused of killing his wife and his best friend - the murder case being dubbed 'The Free Love Murders.'

The story of the 1875 trial is unfolded from trial transcripts and a journal, interspersed with Flynn's current day investigation of the story behind the photograph, which brings her into contact with several people who have a connection to this piece of history, and also people researching the life of Victoria Woodhull, an American suffragist who was a campaigner for women's rights in the 19th century.

This is a many faceted work, weaving a real-life character and her beliefs into a credible story of murder, which also has its' own message for the inhabitants of both centuries. I was captivated by the story, the well-drawn characters, and the insight into The Oneida Community, which was an education in itself. This book is highly recommended.

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Lizzie Hayes

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### **Lorraine Shaw says**

Could not get into this book.

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### **Tara Chevrestt says**

Joint review between Shomeret and I: <http://wwwbookbabe.blogspot.com/2014/...>

A teaser:

Shomeret: This is supposed to be a historical mystery with a contemporary story line, but I didn't consider either the history or the mystery adequately handled.

Tara: I actually really liked the mystery. Well, except I confess I grew confused by the time changes. We suddenly went from court transcriptions to jumping back a few months or a year or so before the murder even transpired to jumping forward to Victoria Woodhull after the court events occurred and I was quite jarred at times. I think I just truly love court-room drama and that is what saved this for me. But it did grow confusing.

The contemporary story-line...didn't do much for me. I quickly forgot about the characters as soon as the historical scenes popped up again. When it switched to contemporary, I was like, "Oh, I forgot about these people!" I thought dialogue in the contemporary scenes was well done though--the banter btw characters.

Shomeret: I liked the themes dealt with in this book, but there isn't enough development of the context. I did notice a rather detailed description of 19th century photography techniques which could be fascinating if that interests you. Yet I thought the Oneida Community, which was fairly essential background was given short shrift. Someone who knows nothing about it, wouldn't really understand that it's significant. I would have

wanted a flashback.

Tara: I, too, wanted more of that community. It seemed interesting and yet so passing in mention. I wonder if anyone has penned a novel about it?

Also of note are the mentions of Anthony Comstock and Reverend Henry Ward Beecher. I feel like too often in the story, we were teased, having tidbits of fascinating information dangled in front of us but not really followed through on, forcing us instead to browse the Internet for more data. Did you find yourself wanting to know about those men?

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### **Dana Burgess says**

I enjoyed this book. It is a 'time travelling' book in that the story bounces back and forth between the present and Victorian times as Flynn tries to unravel the mystery behind an old photo she finds in an old book. I loved the story in the past. It was well told, interesting and suspenseful. The story in the present I found less intriguing. The author really could have left the story in the past and disregarded the present story all together. Still, a quick, fun read for a rainy day.

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### **Melana says**

I won a signed copy of this book on Goodread's Firstread's giveaway! And it is a wonderful read.

The cover art of this book is the first thing that caught my eye. The jacket didn't disappoint. The "who done it" opened in the present day with the discovery of a "spirit photograph" at an estate sale. The book moves back and forth fluidly from the present day investigation to the past "Free Love Murder" trial and involvement of Victoria Woodhull (a historical figure who advocated for women's rights and what was termed during that time period as "free love") to conduct a séance for the defendant as he awaits the jury verdict in his murder trial. This book is a mystery, love story and detective story all at the same time, lots of twists and turns and with the characters from the past and present connected. It also addresses social issues that we take for granted today, but were actually against the law during the late 1800's.

I will be recommending this book to my friends and I hope that they will enjoy it as much as I have.

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### **Gayle B says**

I love historical fiction. This story prompted me to look up Victoria Woodhull. I love how the author intertwines facts with the story and how the story goes between current time and 1875. Did not figure out who did it until it was revealed. Excellent book.

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