

# Colby



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## Last Page

Kate Manning

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## TEACHING, LIKE MEDICINE, HAS COME A LONG, LONG WAY

It all started with a strange 19th-century potion called Female Monthly Pills.

One October morning, students in Gibson Professor of History Elizabeth Leonard's course American Women's History, studying antebellum attitudes toward sexuality, were discussing advertisements that appeared regularly in penny papers of the mid-19th century. The ads offered tablets and were placed by one Madame Restell, known in her day as "the wickedest woman in New York."

"The very best medicine for ladies laboring under the suppression of their natural illness ... they very seldom fail to relieve," the ads read.

In plain words, these sometimes-dangerous pills were used to cause miscarriage. If they didn't, Restell was known to perform abortions.

Restell practiced as a midwife and "females' physician" in New York City from 1840 until her sensational suicide the night before her trial—on criminal charges—in 1878. For decades she was in the headlines and hounded by the law. Leonard's students talked about how Restell's ads were evidence that attitudes toward sexuality, pregnancy, and childbirth were changing during the antebellum era.

One student in particular appeared to know rather more about this character Restell than could be gleaned from the reading. The reason, he told Leonard after class, was that his, um ... mother had spent six years writing a novel, *My Notorious Life*, loosely based on the remarkable Restell story, and it had just been published by Scribner Books. Professor Leonard decided it was time to bring this mom to Colby.

That's how I ended up having the extraordinary experience of speaking about my novel to an audience that included that student—my son, Oliver Dunne '14—with my daughter Eliza Dunne '17 and my nephew James Manning '17 as special invitees. Back in New York, Kara Watson '03, Scribner Books' senior marketing manager, was thrilled to hear one of her authors was to visit the college that jump-started her own career in publishing—thanks to a Jan Plan internship at HarperCollins.

What struck me right away about this marvelous confluence of Colby ties, academia, family, book-publishing, and history, was Leonard's creative pedagogy. Though I do teach (creative writing), I'm not a historian, and I have none of her academic credentials. (Leonard is the author of several books of original research about the Civil War era and is the 2012 winner of the Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize.) So why invite somebody who makes things up for a living into a history class where students are learning to get at the truth?

Well, all history tells a story, we agreed. And stories speak to history.

Clearly, professors like Leonard have changed the study of the past—and the future. In my own college experience, history scholarship consisted of dry memorization of dates and concepts about battles, leaders, and political movements—none of it about women. Current Colby history students do their share of absorbing concepts and remembering dates, but now they also learn as scholars do, by looking at primary sources—letters, documents, and

of history so that it includes figures like Restell—offering her for even-handed consideration as a harbinger of change, perhaps a forerunner of the women's reproductive rights movement. Leonard's reading list for this course included such works as *A Midwife's Tale* by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, based on the life of Martha Ballard, a 19th-century Maine midwife. Leonard's own work has examined gender battles, focusing on female Civil War spies and female soldiers who disguised themselves as men. Learning about these women, students gain a new



PHOTO BY JACOB A. (JACOB AUGUST) RIIS (L849-1914)

*Organized Charity. Minding the Baby, "A little mother." ca. 1890. This photo inspired Manning to invent the Irish immigrant character that would become the protagonist in her novel.*

cultural artifacts like those ads for "female pills." They read analysis of these sources and write their own—assembling narratives and drawing meaning from original texts. And sometimes they take advantage of quirky, serendipitous resources—like me—found in the Colby community.

So, in Professor Leonard's classroom, just before Family Homecoming Weekend, I showed her students slides to show how my imagination was fired by an 1890 photograph of a street girl holding an infant (above). How I started writing a story about that girl, making her a scrappy Irish immigrants' daughter named Axie Muldoon. How I stumbled upon the riveting story of the notorious Madame Restell and decided that Axie would share parts of Restell's history.

I came away from my Colby classroom experience excited by the ways scholars including Leonard are transforming the teaching and study

and dramatically enriched conception of the past.

So instead of rote learning and recitation, the class that day featured a head-spinning discussion about race, charity, and notions of childhood. It turned to the current debate on reproductive rights and its roots in the 19th-century anti-vice movement led by religious crusader Anthony Comstock, who was responsible for arresting Madame Restell. The students drew on a dazzling array of ideas and facts. Their curiosity and eloquence impressed upon me how the extraordinary cross-disciplinary environment at Colby not only connects past to present but connects the many disparate members of the Colby family in ways that enhance knowledge for all of us.

The Colby prescription for education? Novel treatments, yes, but there is no quackery here.

*Kate Manning P'14 P'17 is a novelist and former documentary television producer. She lives in New York City.*