



The Rossetti Diaries

by Kathleen Williams Renk

Historian Maggie Winegarden decides she needs to spend some time away from her partner Bethany, who is upset over Maggie's desire to be a painter. Maggie visits the seaside town of Hastings and while in St. Clement's Church discovers that poet Christina Rossetti and artist Elizabeth "Lizzie" Siddal had been frequent visitors to Hastings and the church. Agatha, the church caretaker, shows Maggie a chest of papers in the catacombs that the vicar said belonged to Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Maggie discovers the papers are actually the lost diaries of Christina and Lizzie. She learns that Christina's and Lizzie's lives are intertwined beyond being sisters-in-law, that they become intimate friends and establish a community of women artists and poets, a Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood in Lizzie's ancestral home, Hope Hall.

Maggie is joined by Bethany and Agatha in the quest to solve the mystery of how the diaries were buried in the St. Clement's Church catacombs and uncover surprising revelations on the origins of Christina's most famous poem "Goblin Market."

Wrapped in a modern-day mystery, *The Rossetti Diaries* is a historical re-imagining that explores the indomitable artistic aspirations and achievements of the poet Christina Rossetti and the artist Elizabeth Siddal.

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Reviews

"Kathleen Renk takes us beyond Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," to Victorian England and into the imagined lives of women on the periphery of artistic greatness by association with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood whose careers eclipsed their own. The lover and the sister of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Lizzie Siddal and Christina Rossetti, reveal in diary entries over a century after their death their profound commitment to their own painting and poetry, respectively, along with the immense challenges in being taken seriously as artists and independent thinkers. When the women eventually meet, the passionate bond they form as friends serves as a brief respite from the society they must move among as girls/women experiencing injustices around mental health, health care, sexual abuse and artistic achievement readers will recognize today. At the same time, the novel illuminates the era through memorable historical detail such as the story behind the painting of John Everett Millais's *Ophelia*, séance societies, and abortion practices. But one of the most distinct pleasures of the novel was encountering familiar poems of Christina Rossetti resonating with the author's biographical

interpretation, which renders them newly, heart-achingly, accessible. Siddall and Rossetti paid a steep price for daring to live on their own terms as artists and friends; but despite the inevitable tragedy, these are women we should see more of in narrative, women who defined themselves not through men but through their art.” — Carol Spaulding-Kruse, author of *Helen Button, A novel*

“Poet Christina Rossetti and artist/enigma Elizabeth Siddal step right out of the mid-19th century and into the 21st as Maggie, a historian with artistic longings of her own, finds and reads their diaries, which have been locked away in a dusty chest in the crypts beneath St. Clement’s Church. The heartfelt pages of the diaries—imagined into being by Kathleen Renk in her latest novel—bring Rossetti and Siddal to vivid life, recreating their voices to give readers a “behind-the-scenes” experience of the art created by two extraordinary women and the struggles they faced as artists and as women in the Victorian age. Though based on the works of both women and tracing the paths of their lives, Renk’s novel takes us beyond the history she knows so well to tantalize the reader with what might have been.” — Mary Helen Stefaniak, award-winning author of *The World of Pondsides* and *The Cailiffs of Baghdad, Georgia*

“While gradually revealing the lives and love of Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal, this engaging dual-time novel raises timeless questions about money, talent, inequality, and the power of sisterhood. It’s a mystery, a romance, and a window onto a little-known sector of Victorian society, all in one.” — C. P. Lesley, host of New Books in Historical Fiction

“The Rossetti Diaries explores the indomitable artistic aspirations and achievements of the poet Christina Rossetti and the artist Elizabeth Siddal, her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s, model and eventual wife. At the engaging heart of the novel lies the tormented relationship of Siddal with Gabriel Rossetti and her struggle to realize her creative gifts.” — Mary Martin Devlin, author of *The La Motte Woman*

About the Author: Kathleen Williams Renk taught British and Women’s literature for nearly three decades in the U.S. and abroad. Her scholarly books include *Caribbean Shadows and Victorian Ghosts: Women’s Writing and Decolonization* (Univ. Press of Virginia, 1999), *Magic, Science, and Empire in Postcolonial Literature: The Alchemical Literary Imagination* (Routledge, 2012), and *Women Writing the Neo-Victorian Novel: Erotic “Victorians”* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). While earning her Ph.D. in English at the University of Iowa, Williams Renk studied fiction writing with James Alan MacPherson. Her short fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in *Iowa City Magazine*, *Literary Yard*, *Page and Spine*, *CC & D Magazine*, and *the Scarlet Review*. Her debut novel, *Vindicated: A Life of Mary Shelley*. *Vindicated* won Story Circle Network’s 2021 May Sarton Award in Historical Fiction; it was also a finalist for the CIBA Goethe Award and was longlisted for the Chautauqua Literary Prize.

