FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Historical

Crown of Dust
Mary Volmer
Soho Press
978-1-56947-861-5
(August 31, 2010)

Disguising oneself as a man has long been a trick of heroines; fictional—and historical—women aplenty have sought safety, anonymity, and heroism by donning masculine garb. Debut novelist Mary Volmer's heartwarming story, set during America's Gold Rush, makes a vital contribution to the literature of women who won the Wild West.

This novel's title plays interestingly against the name of the Victoria Inn, whose owner Emaline has shed her era's corseted femininity to interrogate the meaning of stereotypes and identity in a time and place in which people of all stripes routinely reinvented themselves. Emaline's hospitality above and below stairs provides safe cover both for those she shelters and for her violation of society's most viciously-enforced taboos. Her secrets disincline her from inquiring too closely into the affairs of her youngest boarder, Alex, although his taciturnity and easy embarrassment suggest a story waiting to be told. When this novice miner finds a large nugget of gold, his unique use of the treasure protects his secret, even as envious old-timers name him "Golden Boy," a moniker that combines mystique and innocence to foreshadow the many ways that gifts may become more than their recipients desire.

Through Volmer's characters, readers experience the heady brew of rugged living and fortune-hungry optimism that characterized America's gold-mining towns. When would-be politicians and their temperance-minded wives arrive on the waves of the prosperity that Alex's find seems to augur, the residents of Motherlode find themselves fighting battles they had hoped to avoid. The contradictions between Emaline's daily life and her dreams for what the town could become create a mixture as volatile as the stick dynamite the miners use fecklessly to gash open the landscape of their beloved haven.

The novel's present-tense narration articulates each character's perspective; from David, a guilt-stricken immigrant afraid to write home; to Limpy, whose easy, irresistible patter disguises his moral variability; this book's characters embody the iconic myths of the American

frontier. As each responds to the external events of the novel's climactic scenes, he or she must also struggle privately, and it is these battles, in the end, that may matter more than who lives or dies. Although this novel squarely faces violence, hypocrisy, and treachery, its psychological depth gives it the relevance without which even the most dramatic events become mere stereotypes.

As the story unfolds, readers will realize that they are indeed being handed a gift, a nugget of pure gold.

Elizabeth Breau