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The Open Door

Elizabeth Maguire
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The heroine of Elizabeth Maguire's historical novel, Constance Fenimore Woolson, points out to her new friend Henry James that the "dilemma of modern female life" is the "freedom to think, to desire, but not the freedom to act." Any reader who has a passing familiarity with James's life and writing, and the societal constraints of the Victorian era, will instantly recognize why he would have found this "she-novelist" a kindred spirit.

The relationship between Woolson and James has been one of great speculation for literary critics and historians. James, a great American writer of the late 1800s and early 1900s, and a symbol of American expatriates living in Europe, has been a subject of fascination. A private man, assumed to be a closeted homosexual, he cultivated several relationships with women, wrote about them (*Daisy Miller* and *A Portrait of a Lady*), and seemed to harbor a love-hate view of the so-called gentler sex, most of whom adored and admired him. In Maguire's imagining of him, the focus is on Woolson, but it's the speculation about what went on between the two (they destroyed their mutual correspondence) that drives the novel.

Woolson, who might be an unfamiliar figure to the general reader, was the grandniece of James Fenimore Cooper, the prolific American writer whose fiction included *The Last of the Mohicans*. In this novel, after the death of her mother, Constance leaves the United States for Europe in pursuit of Henry James, not because she's in love with him, but because she's transfixed by his writing: "Has a writer kept whispering in your ear long after the last page is turned? Did you ever long to meet that person who sees the world with your eyes, so that you can continue the conversation? That is how I felt about Harry before I ever laid eyes on him." And while he does eventually give Constance his attention, it's not without a price.

Maguire, who passed away in 2006 of ovarian cancer, was an editor at Basic Books specializing in nonfiction. She worked with several prominent authors during her career, including Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. She wrote one other novel, *Thinner, Blonder, Whiter*, a steamy modern mystery. With the story of Constance Fenimore Woolson, she's created a sensual, independent heroine who shares her sentiments without becoming sentimental. Woolson would have approved.
OLIVIA BOLER (April 11, 2008)

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