

A conversation with AMY STEWART

How did you discover the story of the Kopp sisters?

While researching *The Drunken Botanist*, I ran across a story about a man named Henry Kaufman who was arrested for smuggling tainted gin. I thought I should do a little more investigation to see if Henry Kaufman went on to do anything else interesting. That's when I found an article in the New York Times from 1915 about a man named Henry Kaufman who ran his car into a horse-drawn carriage driven by these three sisters, Constance, Norma, and Fleurette Kopp. They got into a conflict over payment for the damages, and it escalated from there. The sisters received kidnapping threats, shots were fired at their house, and they were generally tormented for almost a year. I never did figure out if this Henry Kaufman was the same one who was arrested for gin smuggling, but I kept digging into the story of the Kopp sisters.



The Three Kopp Sisters All Carried Revolvers During Their Hackensack "Reign of Terror."

Once I compiled a short stack of newspaper clippings, I thought, "Well, surely somebody has written a book about the Kopp sisters. At least a little local history book, or a children's book, or something." I was amazed to find out that nothing had been written about them at all. There was no book, no Wikipedia page—nothing. They'd been completely forgotten about. I reconstructed their life stories from scratch. A lot of people write historical fiction about well-known figures from another era, but I think it's a very different thing to pluck someone from obscurity and put the facts together for the first time.

Apart from being harassed by Henry Kaufman, what make the Kopp sisters so special?

I love their very distinct and interesting personalities. Constance is very much the hero—she's the one who made headlines all over the country and had a truly groundbreaking career. But she also had some weak spots. There was a troubled secret in her past, which is revealed in *Girl Waits With Gun*, and there's the fact that she was definitely a tall, stocky woman who really stood out in a crowd. But Norma and Fleurette were also unusual in their own way. Norma was highly opinionated and antisocial. Fleurette was theatrical, fashionable, and prone to getting into trouble. They make a fascinating trio.

This car accident changed the course of their lives. The oldest sister, Constance, worked with the sheriff to put a stop the harassment. In fact, the book's title, *Girl Waits With Gun*, is the headline of a newspaper article about the night Constance spent on a street corner with a revolver in her handbag waiting to catch the guy who had been threatening her family.

Was it unusual for a sheriff to involve the victim of a crime in helping to catch the criminal?

Actually, it wasn't as unusual as you might think. In 1914, when *Girl Waits With Gun* begins, law enforcement in most of the country was still a very ad hoc kind of activity. There was very little in the way of training or even a clear sense of what the role of a police department or sheriff's office should be. It was not at all unusual for a sheriff to go out and round up a posse of able-bodied men to comb through the woods in search of a criminal. There were still so-called "protection leagues," which were really just volunteer vigilante committees charged with catching horse thieves and things like that.



So it wasn't particularly out of the ordinary for Sheriff Heath to enlist the Kopp sisters in helping to catch their attacker, but the idea of a woman out on patrol with a gun was very unusual, and that's why it got so much newspaper attention.

How did you put the story of their lives together?

It's been a huge research project, and it isn't over yet. I've collected hundreds of newspaper articles, both from digitized papers that have been put online, and from good old-fashioned microfilm in library basements. I went around to courthouses to pull birth certificates, property deeds, and criminal case records.

I've also been to Paterson and Hackensack to visit the places where the major events took place. I got to tour the jail where Sheriff Heath lived and worked.

I just showed up there unannounced, and the public information officer seemed a little suspicious of me until I started talking about Robert Heath. Then he said, "I know who Robert Heath was! I have pictures of him." He took me on a tour of the jail, which is no longer used as a jail but has been declared a historic building and is being preserved. He shared digitized photos of Robert Heath, and many pictures that I suspect Heath took, including one of Constance Kopp. They had no idea who she was.

I went by the house where the Kopp sisters lived in the 1920s, the site where their house in Wyckoff once stood, and the cemetery where they are buried, as well as the locations of significant events, such as the intersection where the car accident took place. It's weird and more than a little eerie to go around to all these locations that exist mostly in my imagination and see what they are like today. I can stand there and imagine them the way they were in 1914, like a layer of an alternate reality sitting on top of what's there now. It's incredibly strange and wonderful to walk down a street that I know Constance Kopp walked down. It's like I keep running into this imaginary character of mine in the real world.

I remember one night, early in the research, when I said to my husband, "I wonder what Constance's mother thought about all this?" Later that night, I found a lengthy newspaper profile of Constance in which she answered that exact question. Being able to find answers to my questions about my characters in the real world is just bizarre and delightful.

Are there any family members still around who remember the Kopp sisters?

There are, and I found them because of Ancestry.com. I had been using the site to put the Kopp sisters' family history together. Census records through 1940 have been digitized, so I was able to find them in the census going back to the 1880s, and I turned up listings in city directories, immigration records, and so on. But the real surprise was finding someone else who was working on the Kopp family tree. I contacted them and pretty soon I was talking to the grandson of Francis, the Kopp sisters' brother. About a year later, another tree popped up, and it belonged to Fleurette's son. I can't even begin to describe what it felt like to sit down with a man who not only knew Fleurette, but was raised by her. It was one of the most extraordinary days of my life.

I even tracked down family members who remembered other characters in the book, like Robert Heath and John Ward. That was the most amazing part of the research: sitting down and talking to people who either knew my characters personally, or remembered family stories about them. And I was very happy to be able to share what I'd found and help them complete their family trees.



Fleurette and Constance Kopp

You've written six nonfiction books. What made you decide to tell this story as fiction?

I knew I wanted to write about the Kopp sisters on the first day I turned up that article about the Kaufman case. As a nonfiction writer, I was always looking for interesting human stories to liven up my books about the natural world. I've learned how to recognize a good story when I see one. With the Kopp sisters, I found everything a storyteller could ever want—an interesting time period, a very distinctive but not particularly well-known setting, and these larger than life characters who carried around deep, dark secrets from their past and went out into the world and defied everyone's expectation of what a woman could do.

But in spite of everything I knew about them, there are all kinds of gaps in their story. I knew that if I could write it as historical fiction, I could fill in those gaps. I want everyone who reads this book to be as entertained and amazed as I was by the Kopp sisters, and fiction gives me the freedom to do that on a bigger canvas. I'm not confined to the facts, although I try to be true to them.



How did you decide when to stick with the facts and when to veer away from them?

It wasn't easy at first. I had to step away from my connection to these real people and allow myself to create characters who are similar to them, but aren't actually them. It was a strange emotional shift that I could actually feel in my gut when it was happening. But once I could see them as characters, I could play with them much more. For instance, Norma Kopp didn't keep pigeons (as far as I know!), but I felt that it was in keeping with certain things I know about the real Norma Kopp, and certain things I'd invented about my character of the same name. The pigeons take Norma in a very interesting direction, so I'm glad I have the freedom to play around with her character in that way.

In *Girl Waits With Gun*, the entire plot thread involving Lucy Blake is fiction. She's a factory girl who worked in Henry Kaufman's factory and got into some trouble. She was useful to me because she gave Constance a reason to reflect on her own past, and she helped me make Henry Kaufman more of a three-dimensional villain. She also gave me an excuse to talk about the Paterson silk strikes of 1913, which was a very interesting moment in history.

But then there are other tiny details that are real. For instance, the handwriting expert William Kingsley was a real person who actually did work on the case. He's barely mentioned at all, but he was very famous at the time for having pioneered modern handwriting analysis. He was able to match Henry Kaufman's handwriting to some of the threatening letters.

Basically, my rule has been: To the extent that I know what really happened, I should use it. When I don't know what happened, I can make stuff up. So everything that really happened to the Kopp sisters in 1914 and 1915 is in the book—the buggy accident, the subsequent threats and violence (including the actual text of the threatening letters, which I got from court records), and most of the family history that comes out in flashbacks. But there's also a lot that didn't happen, and quite a few gaps that I had to fill in.



So what was so fascinating about the Paterson silk strikes?

It was this incredible moment in the history of American labor that most of us don't know anything about. Paterson was a factory town — Alexander Hamilton had the idea that it should be America's first purely industrial city — and in the silk mills were big business in 1913. When the mill owners wanted to increase hours and

workloads without increasing pay, the workers went on strike. They were organized by the Industrial Workers of the World, who most people know about from the movie *Reds*. In fact, Warren Beatty's character, Jack Reed, was in Paterson for the strikes and wrote some amazing dispatches from jail.

Factory workers throughout New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania walked off their jobs in solidarity. In all, an estimated 50,000 workers joined the six-month strike. Because it was so hard to get word out about the strike in those days, the organizers put on a pageant in Madison Square Garden where they basically reenacted the major events of the strike so that New Yorkers would know what was going on.

Margaret Sanger, who would go on to help establish Planned Parenthood, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a tireless advocate for workers, were among the leaders of the strike. They organized the evacuation of strikers' children from Paterson, sending them off to live with families in New York because their parents couldn't feed them. All of those details in the book are true, and it's also true that a few of those children didn't come back.

Unfortunately, the strikers lost, and they went back to work after six months. But they continued to agitate and stick up for themselves, just as workers do today. I really wanted to set a few scenes inside the factory to give a sense of what it was like for people to work for Henry Kaufman and men like him.

Constance Kopp has a very distinctive voice in this novel. What made you decide to write it from her perspective, and how did you find that voice?

This was really a gut decision. I felt from the beginning that it should be Constance's story, and when you find out how their lives play out, you'll see why.

My great-grandmother was born in Pennsylvania in 1905, which means that she was about 27 years younger than Constance and a couple states away from where Constance was born in Brooklyn. But she's the only person I've ever known personally who came anywhere close to Constance's generation and to that part of the country. My great-grandmother spoke in a very declarative, self-possessed way, with a clear, musical voice and a remarkable ability to claim the attention of a room full of people and hold it for as long as she had something to say. She died about twenty years ago, but I have a home movie of her looking into the camera and speaking very directly to us. I realized that her manner of speaking was very unusual by today's standards, and I tried to hold it in my head as I searched for Constance's voice. I also read a lot of novels and magazines from that era to try to get a handle on the language. Constance was born in 1878, so she was of the Victorian era, but by 1914 there would have been a bit of a modern sensibility creeping in.

I'm glad that no one ever suggested that I take the story out of Constance's voice and put it in the third person or write it from a different perspective. I really fell for Constance immediately and wanted to get as close to her as I could. She was bold and tough and clever, but she'd had her share of problems, too. She was a big woman—almost six feet tall, weighing 180 pounds—and something about her size also endeared her to me. My version of Constance is very comfortable with her stature, although it does put her in some awkward situations from time to time.

What can we expect for the future?

Well, the latter half of 1915 and all of 1916 were very interesting times for the Kopp sisters, so there's lots of rich material...



Miss CONSTANCE KOPP