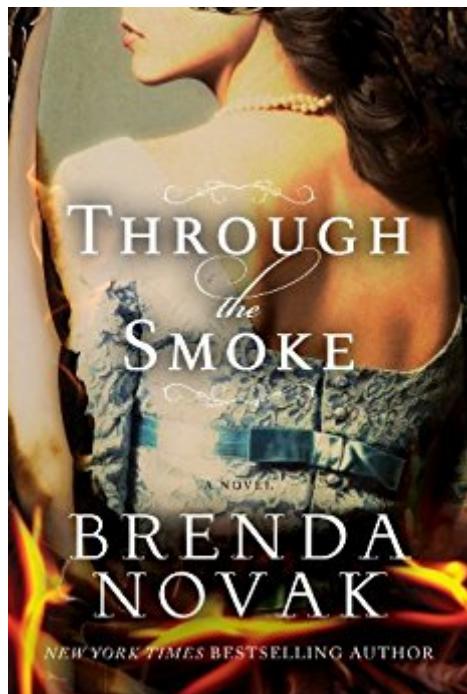


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Through The Smoke



Synopsis

Winner of the National Readers' Choice Award for Historical Romance A shocking betrayal. Riches. Power. An ancient heritage of pride. The Earl of Druridge wanted only for an heir. So when he learned that his wife was carrying another man's child, he was filled with a thirst for vengeance. But he wasn't the one who caused Katherine's death. Or was he? To his horror, he remembers nothing of that dreadful night, when their last shocking confrontation ended in scorching flame and cold blood. A forbidden love. Rachel McTavish, the beautiful daughter of a coal miner, knows something about the fire that took Lady Katherine's life. In secret, the strong-willed girl strikes a bargain with the desperate earl: he must send his physician to help her dying mother or he may go to the scaffold—and the devil. The earl agrees, but Rachel is still unsure that her revelation will be enough to save him when so many wish him dead. Passionately drawn to the nobleman, despite all the doubt and mystery that shrouds him, Rachel wonders if he can really be a murderer. Or if he is the only man who will ever own her heart.

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Customer Reviews

I'm not a stickler for total historical accuracy because I can't pretend to know more about England in the 1800s than what I read in (primarily) romance novels that take place during the era. However, I do expect an author to at least write within the realm of the believable. Unfortunately, I was unable to suspend disbelief as I read much of this novel. In this book, the hero is the Earl of Druridge, whose wife died after a suspicious fire in his home. He is bent on clearing his name, though he himself isn't exactly sure of his own innocence. Rachel MacTavish is the daughter of a deceased miner who worked for Druridge. He mistakenly believes that she holds the truth about the fire. This story might have worked if there were some sexual tension that led up to the two falling for each other. Instead, Rachel is practically raped by the earl (she is semi-conscious through it, and the author would have us believe she enjoys the experience, but I wasn't sold). What follows is a series of events that simply breaks all the boundaries and rules of the time period. The earl doesn't just move Rachel into his home; he moves her into his dead wife's suite, dresses her in his dead wife's clothes, and gives her the run of his household. I suppose he's supposed to be a tortured hero, but he just came across as weak, ineffectual, and clueless at times. So much so that I don't think the mystery of the fire is much of mystery to readers for very long. If you expect historical accuracy in your historicals, and if you expect romance in your romances, I'd pass on this one.

This review is of *Through the Smoke* by Brenda Novak. Note: this review contains spoilers! Rachel McTavish is the daughter of a mine worker and a middle class woman who runs a book store and teaches the locals to read. It's 1840 in a small village in England where most of the men work in the mine and everyone knows everyone. They even know the Earl of Druridge who killed his wife and unborn babe two years ago and who also owns the mine where they work. At least they think they know him. And they think they know his wastrel cousin Wythe. But here's the problem: the Earl, otherwise known as Truman, doesn't know if he killed his wife or not. He remembers running into the house to confront her about the babe which he did not sire, and he remembers being pulled from the fire by Wythe, but nothing else. He doesn't know who set the fire or if he injured his wife in any way so she could not escape. But Rachel might know. Rachel's father was blamed for starting the fire, but now he's dead. The Earl wants Rachel to confide in him, but she can't face being turned on by the villagers if she talks to him. But her mother is ill and Truman has a physician staying with him. . . So Rachel braves not only the storm but the villagers by turning to the Earl for help. Unfortunately, they are too late, and now Rachel and her brother are alone in the world. This is where the downward spiral begins. The Earl left a ten pound note for Rachel when he and the doctor left after finding her mother dead. Rachel, however, didn't find out about the money until after the funeral.

Upset at the perceived charity, Rachel goes to Blackmoor Hall to confront Truman, but is accosted by Wythe, hit on the head, drugged, and left in Truman's bed. In her drugged state, Rachel hopes it is a dream, but fears it is real. The next morning she dresses and leaves the ten pound note, another note that Truman had left for her, and goes home. Where you guessed it, everyone now knows she spent the night at Blackmoor Hall. Far-fetched? Maybe. Unbelievable? Maybe. But the bigger issue is who cares? It's fiction! It's about a young lady who will never be happy with one of the villagers as a husband. She needs someone to challenge her intellect and accept her for who she is. And Truman will never find out the truth by himself. He needs someone like Rachel to tell him the honest truth about what is going on, someone with the strength to fight not only for her life but his. It's a story of redemption and love and I loved it!

The opening of Novel's novel sets the stage for the murder that occurs in short order. We know that the Earle wants revenge for his wife's infidelity, but no one seems to know who set the fire in which she perished. The characters are an interesting blend of mine workers, townsfolk, and the Earle and his servants. There is also enough mystery regarding that fatal fire (and some priceless paintings that disappeared beforehand) to cast doubt on just about every character. Add to that the tension created when a simple bookstore owner and the Earle discover a strong and awkward attraction between them, and the formula for a mystery/romance is set. As the plot develops, we experience twists, turns, and intense character interactions that have us wondering who will succeed and how the fire started. The romantic thread felt a bit strained at times to this reader, but the mystery thread kept me engaged throughout.

I like Brenda Novak so I knew that this book would be well written. I did enjoy the writing style and the plot was original. However, the story was much more mystery than romance and I hated that the "romance" began with a rape. Whatever you want to call it, that's what happened. I believe in attraction at first sight, but this book like so many others wants to portray a true love at first sight. I just don't buy it. I was also very disinterested in the whole mining aspect of this book which really made me feel the book was more modern. The writing about the mines was too modern, more like an old west novel. Also, I've never heard of the aristocracy taking such a personal interest in running a mine. Just couldn't buy it. Overall well written but lacking that luster and shine that sets a romance novel apart. So so.

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