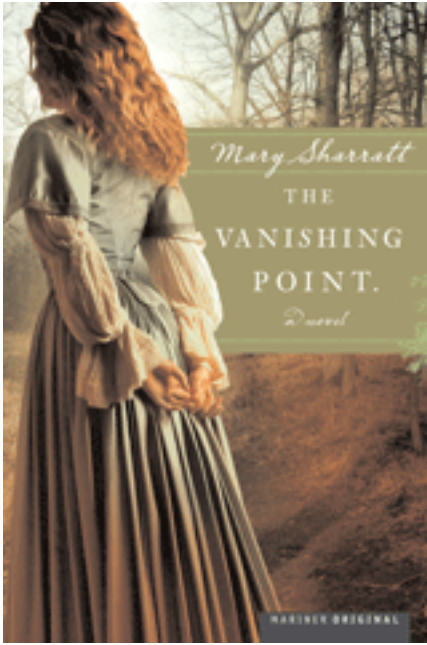


Press Release



The Vanishing Point

by Mary Sharratt

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A Mariner Paperback Original

"Mary Sharratt's *The Vanishing Point* is her best novel yet, a passionate, spell-casting story . . . I was unable to put this book down." — Sandra Gulland, author of the Josephine Bonaparte trilogy

"So it transpired that both people and ships could become ghosts without ever dying or sinking beneath the waves." — from *The Vanishing Point*

About the Book

Mary Sharratt's gripping new novel, *The Vanishing Point* (Mariner Paperback Original, June 2, 2006), weaves together the stories of two independent, spirited sisters — one lost, the other searching. Sharratt's exquisite period piece, set in the seventeenth century, brings to life dramatic and mysterious events that push the limits of truth, love, and the bond between sisters.

Hannah and May Powers could not be more different. Hannah is the learned, though shy, dutiful daughter whom their widowed father treats more like a son, and May is the reckless, vibrant, beautiful spirit who pushes the boundaries of life and love. After a series of sexual misadventures in their English town, May is betrothed to a distant cousin in Maryland. When their father dies, Hannah follows May to the wilds of America, but upon arrival Hannah learns that her sister has mysteriously disappeared. But how? And why?

Alone in an untamed, uncultivated land where the old rules no longer apply, Hannah is freed from the constraints of a society that had judged both her and May as dangerous - too smart, too fearless, and too hungry for life. But Hannah's increasing fear is palpable as she struggles to understand her sister's fate, and nothing is as it seems. Torn between her devotion to May and her growing love for May's husband, Hannah must decipher the truth from the disturbing, tangled stories surrounding her sister's vanishing.

In the tradition of Philippa Gregory, Sharratt truly evokes life in early America, thanks to ten years of meticulous research on such topics as seventeenth-century pharmacology and pioneer cooking. Equal parts adventure, love story, and dark mystery, *The Vanishing Point* is a hauntingly vivid novel that will leave you in suspense until the final pages.

About the Author

Mary Sharratt's first novel, *Summit Avenue*, was a Book Sense selection. She has taught at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis and has given workshops around the country on the subject of women and fairy tales. She lives in Lancashire, England.

A Conversation with Mary Sharratt

What inspired you to write *The Vanishing Point*?

Many years ago, as a tourist in Philadelphia, I visited a tiny row house where two eighteenth-century seamstresses once lived and plied their trade. I felt immediately drawn into their world. It was inspirational for me to learn that even in that era, when nearly every factor of the dominant religion and economy herded women into marriage and domesticity, some women still succeeded in carving out independent, masterless lives, ruled by neither father nor husband.

This sparked the idea of using fiction to explore women's lives in early America. What might happen to a late-seventeenth-century woman who was determined to carve out her own destiny and who demanded the same liberties, both social and sexual, as a man? This was how May's character was conceived. I read Antonia Fraser's *The Weaker Vessel*, a groundbreaking study on the lives of seventeenth-century women, and *A Maggot*, John Fowles's fictional investigation of the woman who was to become the mother of Mother Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers.

This manuscript stretched me to my utmost through a period of considerable upheaval, as life circumstances took me from Germany to California and then to the north of England. Finally, in the Lancashire countryside the novel took root and gained a life force of its own. My characters' surnames were lifted from grave markers in old village churchyards. I found myself living at the foot of Pendle Hill. The yew trees and hawthorn hedges that May longs for in her American exile grow outside my door.

It dawned on me that my Maryland settlers were displaced English people, completely out of their element, and that this was the key to portraying them with confidence and authority. The Andrew Marr quote I selected for the flyleaf of the novel expresses it best: "Once upon a time the Americans were the British, lost." One of the core texts I discovered in my research, David Hackett Fischer's monumental *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, drove the point home.

How did you research the book?

I researched the material extensively over a period that stretched for roughly ten years. I visited living-history museums in the Chesapeake, including Jamestown, Williamsburg, and George Washington's birthplace. I visited exhibits of early American history at the Smithsonian. I learned about spinning and fiber craft, contraceptives of the period, butchering animals, tanning hides with brain and bark, tobacco planting, the lives of indentured servants, sea travel and the triangular trade, and Afro-Caribbean magic and folk religion, among other things.

While living in Germany, I studied alternative medicine, particularly phytotherapy (plant/herbal medicine), and the history of medicine. This background knowledge went into the book. Many of the herbs I wrote about are ones I grow in my own garden and have used on myself, albeit in a different way than portrayed in the book.

What were the most surprising facts about colonial America that you gleaned from your research?

One of the things I learned that struck me most was the high rate of mortality and disease in the Chesapeake during this period. The slave trade brought both malaria and yellow fever to the region. Whereas the much healthier climate of New England produced longevity and extended families in which people lived to see their grandchildren, in Maryland and Virginia whole generations grew up not knowing their parents, who died young, particularly mothers. Families became fractured; orphans were raised by stepparents and servants. The number one cause of female mortality was childbirth and the second was cooking accidents; women used to stand directly in the huge open hearths where their long skirts came in close contact with the flames.

Also explored in the novel was the enormous double standard when it came to gender and sexuality. Whereas New England Puritan society at least attempted to enforce the same moral code on both men and women, in the Chesapeake free men could do largely what they wanted, while adulteresses and unmarried women who bore bastards were punished by whipping and public humiliation. If a woman had sexual relations with an African slave and bore a child as a result, both she and the child were forced to become slaves.

Another thing that amazed me was that there were no physicians in the Chesapeake during this time. People made do with homemade remedies or, when surgery was called for, the services of the local blacksmith. To see a qualified physician, one had to sail back to England.