

**Synopsis and Background of *The Covert Buccaneer* (working title)
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Based on actual characters and events, *The Covert Buccaneer* tells the story of a modern-day woman, mother, and professional in San Francisco who discovers a 100+-year-old family diary. As she delves into the intimate details of her family's past, a new sense of meaning and purpose emerges. This suspenseful, intricately woven generational tapestry spans political, social, and global threads—past and present—through the lives of two women protagonists, bookending the Anthropocene and its long-term impact on the intersection of climate justice, women's rights, and Indigenous communities. Complex, funny, steamy, relatable, and true, *The Covert Buccaneer* is a family saga of resilience, friendship, adventure and discovery.

Co-protagonist, Georgina Ellis Benvenuto (“Ellie”), a current-day divorced mother of two toddlers (one with severe special needs requiring a team of 14 interventionists), was raised in a small town outside Chicago. Now living in San Francisco, Ellie is a polyglot and attorney. Due to the extraordinary demands of her children, she takes on flexible work, representing climate migrants, undocumented laborers, and asylum cases for women fleeing dangerous situations in their home countries.

While helping her father clear out her grandparents' home in Berkeley, CA, after her grandfather's death, Ellie stumbles upon a box filled with old letters, photographs, artifacts, and an aged leather diary written by her great-great-grandmother, Theodora “Teddy” Ellis (1854-1919). The diary ends in 1919, the year the U.S. Congress passed the 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote.

Ellie hadn't heard of Theodora and is stunned to learn that her great-great-grandmother, though invisible to history and her own family, was a trailblazer on the American Frontier. Teddy was the first woman bookkeeper in Chicago, a miner, suffragist, real estate mogul, and ally of Native Americans. For years, she disguised herself as a man, accompanying her great-great-grandfather on his adventures from Chicago to San Francisco.

Theodora's life story is a whirlwind of the Industrial Revolution, cattle drives, bull train treks across the Plains, the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, saloon shoot-outs, vigilantes, sea voyages, and negotiations with Native Americans. Her adventures include encounters with Buffalo Bill Cody, General Custer, gold and quartz mining, whiskey smuggling, the grand opening of the Palace Hotel in 1875, a San Francisco fortune-teller, discovering a mammoth tooth while prospecting in the Klondike, the “Hat Pin Panic,” and rebuilding San Francisco after the earthquake and fire of 1906.

In short, Ellie's great-great-grandmother, Teddy, was a covert buccaneer—a spirited, restless soul born in what might have seemed the wrong time and place, or perhaps exactly the right one. Although Teddy eventually settled in San Francisco to raise her children while her husband, George, continued prospecting in Mexico and the Klondike (facing, as he put it, “much trouble with the Indians”), she found meaningful pursuits alongside her Miwok best friend. She also

utilized her previous life of disguise to infiltrate male-dominated spaces and strategize for the women's rights movement.

As Ellie walks the same streets her ancestor did over a century earlier, she forms a bond with Teddy through the life parallels they share of their struggles, their friendships, and their romances—including a key clue among her great-great-grandmother's artifacts that solves the mystery of one of Ellie's legal cases.

What's more, Ellie is awed by Teddy's contributions and the pivotal role the Industrial Revolution played in advancing the women's rights Ellie has enjoyed her entire life. Ellie, who once felt her promising legal career at a prestigious San Francisco law firm had been thwarted, now gains a new understanding of the work that remains to be done at the intersection of climate justice and women's rights.

Even more, she realizes she has already begun doing it.

This is the true story of countless women and non-Whites who went unnoticed during their time and why their stories matter to us now.

What led to this project?

While remastering the 100+ year-old unpublished manuscript of her great-great-grandfather, I noticed a glaring absence of women in his otherwise thrilling, Dumas-like adventures. His story is nothing short of spectacular. Still, it represents a limited lens of a White man operating in a White man's world. I tracked each mention of women or non-Whites in his chaotic but gripping memoir, and realized how limited his perspective was, despite the vividness of his prose.

Intrigued by the breadcrumbs he left about the women in his life, I delved deeper, uncovering rich and careening backstories—most notably that of my transcendent great-great-grandmother. Though her name and biography aren't even mentioned in the manuscript, I learned of her through other sources. Written in 1919, the same year Congress passed the 19th Amendment, the manuscript reflects a time when the industrial revolution—the most significant catalyst in history for women's progress in education, economics, and society—was at its peak.

Recognizing the parallels between the advancement of women's rights and the ongoing climate crises that threaten those gains (see my essay, *Indispensable*), I felt compelled to bring these untold stories to light. Through the eyes of my great-great-grandmother's life on the American Frontier, leading to her eventual settlement in San Francisco, I—a longtime resident of the city, as well as an attorney, UN Women VP Emerita, law professor, and special needs parent & advocate—have woven a narrative that connects the past to the present.

Understanding where women have been is crucial to understanding where we are now and what is necessary to move forward. This is that story. Though presented as a work of fiction to engage and entertain, with humor and steamy romance, all aspects of the story are based in truth.

