

The House of Velvet and Glass

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Katherine Howe, author of the phenomenal *New York Times* bestseller *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane*, returns with an entrancing historical novel set in Boston in 1915, where a young woman stands on the cusp of a new century, torn between loss and love, driven to seek answers in the depths of a crystal ball.

Still reeling from the deaths of her mother and sister on the *Titanic*, Sibyl Allston is living a life of quiet desperation with her taciturn father and scandal-plagued brother in an elegant town house in Boston's Back Bay. Trapped in a world over which she has no control, Sibyl flees for solace to the parlor of a table-turning medium.

But when her brother is suddenly kicked out of Harvard under mysterious circumstances and falls under the sway of a strange young woman, Sibyl turns for help to psychology professor Benton Derby, despite the unspoken tensions of their shared past. As Benton and Sibyl work together to solve a harrowing mystery, their long-simmering spark flares to life, and they realize that there may be something even more magical between them than a medium's scrying glass.

From the opium dens of Boston's Chinatown to the opulent salons of high society, from the back alleys of colonial Shanghai to the decks of the *Titanic*, *The House of Velvet and Glass* weaves together meticulous period detail, intoxicating romance, and a final shocking twist that will leave readers breathless.

The House of Velvet and Glass Details


Date : Published April 10th 2012 by Voice/Hyperion (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9781401340919

Author : Katherine Howe

Format : Hardcover 418 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Mystery

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From Reader Review The House of Velvet and Glass for online ebook

Amy says

Every now and again a novel comes along that has the power to bewitch and captivate, and *The House of Velvet and Glass* by Katherine Howe is just such a novel. Set in 1915 Boston, Sibyl Allston seems destined to be an old maid confined to managing her father's home and living a careful life where little changes. Still reeling from the loss of her mother and her younger sister on the Titanic, Sibyl dutifully continues to meet with a medium in an attempt to contact her lost loved ones. Her father, aloof and undemonstrative, made his fortune at sea and is content to work at his shipping business or closet himself in his study. When Sibyl's brother Harlan turns up having been kicked out of Harvard, and in a tawdry affair with a young woman of questionable background Sibyl finds herself awakening to a life she never imagined. Accompanying Harlan's girlfriend to Chinatown Sibyl discovers an unusual talent for scrying. Her talents may be just "pipe dreams" or they may in fact allow her to see into the future. As she begins to explore her new found ability she stumbles on to a long kept family secret. Rich with period detail, Howe deftly entwines colonialist Shanghai, the wreck of the Titanic, Boston's drawing rooms and the days leading up to the Great War. A magical storyteller, Howe enchants readers with a story fit for lovers of historical fiction and tales of the supernatural.

Diana says

I am deeply confused by all of the four and five star ratings. This book dragged on and I only finished because I was sure it had to get better. The descriptions were repetitive (if the author described Sybil's eyes as "obsidian" one more time I was tempted to write her and ask if her thesaurus broke). I don't need to be explicitly told things in a book but there were certain gray areas where I think the author forgot we as the readers are not in her head. I also think she threw in a lot of what she deemed as "smart" analogies in places that had no bearing or relevance. I guess she was banking on the hoopla of the Titanic 100th anniversary. The two stars are only for the vaguely interesting spirit and psychic material.

Connie says

This book was superb. I stayed up all night to finish it; I was so riveted by the story that I could not even consider sleep. While one of the themes in this book is the sinking of the Titanic (there are many out now due to the 100th anniversary), there were many more equally important themes including: Spiritualism, World War I, Addiction issues with opium and morphine; Women's rights, Philosophies of life and death, the Progressive era, Family dynamics, the Shipping trade, and even old-fashioned Romance. Two important motifs were music and clocks/timepieces.

The author also refers those who are interested in conducting more research to her website: www.katherinehowe.com. I will most assuredly visit the site and peruse the suggested bibliography. I also have several issues that I would like to have clarified. Hopefully, I will be able to email the author with my questions.

I was also fascinated by her earlier book "the Physick Book of Deliverance Dane." (If interested, please refer to my "Good Reads" review.) I will now wait eagerly for her next book to be released in the next few years. Since the author conducts extensive research for each book, I am certain that it will be a year or two before the publication of this future book.

Morgan says

I kind of liked her first book, which is why I read this book. However, this book seemed to jump around too much. Boston, Shanghai, the Titanic. Parts of this I did enjoy though.

kari says

I feel badly giving any book only one star, but I actively dislike this book so there you go.

This was a slow, slogging along read, very repetitious with little action and too many people thinking about what something reminds them of which goes on and on. No one can just see someone smile without thinking of when someone else smiled about something and then the conversation that took place around the smile and those reminiscences would go on for several pages before the story would start up again. I'd find myself rereading the same paragraph over and over because the story simply didn't pull me along.

Sibyl, the main character was both boring and, well, stupid, immensely so. She meets a woman of questionable reputation, but the very next day she takes her to tea at some fancy club so this woman can insult people, that's the only reason I can think of. And then she follows this woman to an opium den and after a miniscule hesitation, she decides why not?

I don't even know what the author is trying to say with this book, that opium is fun? She describes it in such loving detail that I'm left to wonder why everyone wouldn't want to smoke it?

The scenes on the Titanic do nothing. They don't move the story along, they don't give any insights into the characters. They just are. And the only thing I can think is that those bits were included because this is the 100th anniversary of the sinking so why not use that to sell books?

Yes, Sibyl (view spoiler) is trying to reach them through a medium, but it's merely the jumping off point and has no real connection to the story. They could have died some other way and it wouldn't really change anything. If you're going to use an historic event, that event had better be necessary to the story.

The story of Sibyl's father is simply more of the same. Too long, too much nothing and not really essential to the story. It could have been told in a few paragraphs when Sibyl learns his secret. There was no reason for it to be drawn out in this way and the inclusion of his blue macaw in every scene at home, ugh. I know it's a reminder of what happened to him, but why did every scene at their home have to tell you what the macaw was doing when he is so inconsequential?

There are many bits like the macaw which are gone over many times and have no use to the story. There is reference to the La Farge window over and over and it has no point. It's just there. The parlors are dark, the curtains drawn and why this is was never explained other than at the end they are opened so is that a metaphor for revealing their secrets and if so, that is quite heavy-handed with no subtlety to it. Look, some light has been let in to their lives. Ta-da!

There is a plot involving Harlan, Sibyl's brother and you think oh, this is going to be exciting. What can have happened to him? Is he involved with loan sharks, drugs, someone from his girlfriend's world? Nope. It is nothing and this plot completely fizzles, not to confuse it with the rest of the fizzle-fest.

The writing is repetitive. I get it! Benton was a college wrestler and is brawnier than most men of his time. Did every person who meets him need to think of his history, his physique and how his suit fits? Once was

more than enough. And there are many instances like that, where something is repeated almost exactly the same way.

It is also very dry reading. None of the relationships, from the familial ones to the romantic ones, pulled at my emotions in any way. Maybe that is purposeful to make the reader feel how stale Sibyl's life has become, but when the thoughts are Harlan's or Lan's the style is the same. It feels that the reader is being kept at a distance, is the best way I can describe it.

This is one of those books that you just keep thinking one more chapter and it will get better, one more chapter and things will start happening. And by the time you realize it isn't going to get better, you think okay, I'm more than halfway there, I'll just finish the darn thing and be done with it. Maybe I'll love the ending and it will make up for the rest of it. Nope, it won't.

I should have used the fifty page rule and tossed it aside.

Wouldn't recommend this book and won't read this author again.

Melodie says

Katherine Howe has a talent for historical fiction. Add to that her ability to interweave the history, mystical pull and danger of the occult, and you have a hit. Her meticulous research and natural eye for detail makes her work a treat for the reader willing to spend the time getting to know not only the characters, but the time and space they occupy. Her stories can be daunting as they draw the reader ever so slowly into the plot. Her characters are complex and flawed. Shades of gray in behavior and history abound. And this story is no different.

Boston, 1915 The sinking of the Titanic is very recent history. Sibyl Allston, eldest daughter of a wealthy family struggles to find some sense, some meaning to the tragedy that took her mother and younger sister. Considered to be the mistress of the house, she is by turns, daunted and/or resentful of her duty. Her brother has been kicked out of university, her father aloof by nature, does not make her job easy. Regular visits to a medium seem to help. There she feels closer to her lost mother. When the medium gives her a scrying crystal she is intrigued. From that one simple act, she embarks on a journey of her own. And as frequently can happen, her journey leads to unexpected places and has unintended consequences. This book had me mesmerized. The twists, turns and switchbacks were amazing. And I came away once again with a better understanding of a period of history that helped shape our country and the world as we entered the truly modern era.

Felice says

The House of Velvet and Glass is the second novel by Katherine Howe. Her first was The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane. Did you like that one? If so stop reading now. You will like Howe's new novel as well. If you didn't like it you can stop reading soon.

Howe's new novel, The House of Velvet and Glass is every bit as suspense-less, flat and over wrought as Howe's first novel. This time Howe sets her story in 1915 Boston. She tosses together the Titanic, WWI, spiritualism, romance, opium and SECRETS into a pasty soap opera soup from which there is only one escape. Breathe easily though the escape is an easy one; just close the book and move on to better things.

Gwen says

Preferably I would give this novel one and a half stars. The premise, (young woman recovering from the loss of her mother and sister on the Titanic and trying to learn why her younger brother was expelled from Harvard in his senior year) while interesting, was far too ambitious and poorly executed by this author.

I just finished this last night and already find myself struggling to remember the heroine's name. The character development was nonexistent and the plot device of switching between 1915 Boston, the final moments on the Titanic, and Shanghai 1868 brought the story to a complete and utter halt.

I was really looking forward to a tale of the seedy opium dens of back alley Boston and the mystery of the brother's expulsion along with the intrigue of a medium's seances, however these were all jumbled together and if I had to read the description of something as "puddled" one more time - e.g. "her dressing gown puddled on the floor", "the moonlight puddled through the window", etc., etc. I was going to throw the book in the garbage.

Altogether this novel did not live up to the flap copy.

Kathleen Lenihan says

The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane was one of my favorite books the year it came out. The plot was fast paced and original, and the characters so interesting and fleshed out. When I saw that the author had a second book coming out, I was excited and purchased it as soon as I saw it at the bookstore.

Unfortunately, I did not find The House of Velvet and Glass nearly as gripping as Howe's first book. The story didn't really take off for me until at least 1/3 of the way through, and the characters were remote and flat. If I had not read her first book, I'm not sure I would have finished this one.

The intriguing twist in the story came too late and far too close to the end. By the last 1/3 of the book Sybil and her father were people I cared about and had a variety of facets to their personalities, and I wondered why the author waited until almost the end to reveal them. It seems like there was the potential for a truly gripping story, but Howe missed the mark. That said, I'm still looking forward to third book from Howe, because her first book was that good.

Tara says

I have to say I was not as impressed with this book as I was with The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane. I had high hopes, but I found this story kind of fell flat. The romance too a bit took too long to even simmer. Personally, I thought she took on too many story lines and so none of the story lines were very strong. What I loved about the other book I read by this author was the way I wanted to know what really happened and there was a sense that all was not like it seemed. This book promised something of the same, but I don't know if she really delivered.

I wanted to know what what was going on and hoped that she was able to connect everything in the end, but

not enough to want to read more than one chapter at bedtime.

❀?Rory?❀ says

Tantalizing glimpses of the unusual, the extraordinary hinted at, but all snatched away; coming to nothing. Ultimately, it's just a series of stories about the life of a family in early 1900's Boston. The characters are well drawn but the the story is so unsatisfying that in the end it doesn't matter. Howe can write and her book *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* is well worth reading and is all that this book is not.

Ariel says

I enjoyed this book much more than Howe's previous book *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane*. I had such high hopes for *Deliverance Dane* and felt a little let down. Conversely I went into this book with much lower expectations and found myself pleasantly surprised.

The story jumps around between events on the night the Titanic sunk, Shanghai 1868, and Massachusetts 1915. Matriarch Helen and her youngest daughter Eulah are on Titanic when it sinks. Helen's other daughter Sybil thinks she may be able to contact them through her psychic abilities in Massachusetts. Sybil's brother Harlan seems to be taking the death of his mother and sister very hard and drops out of school. He takes up with the socially unsuitable Dovie who is befriended by Sybil. Sybil renews an acquaintance with her old flame Benton who tries to assist the family with Harlan's problems and Sybil's burgeoning psychic abilities. Patriarch Harlan's youth as a sailor in Shanghai is told in flashback throughout the novel. All of this may seem quite confusing to keep track of but each chapter is clearly headed as to where it takes place so the narrative is actually quite easy to follow.

As I neared the end of the book it was a solid 3 star for me. At times I had the feeling that the plot was lacking and I couldn't see the tie that bound everything together. As major revelations were made toward the end of the novel I began to enjoy it more and I thought the ending brought everything together in a satisfying way. I loved the time period that the book was set in and I am partial to stories involving the Gilded Age and the Titanic.

Katherine Howe's after word which gave further insight into her story was an interesting way to end the book. If you have patience there is a lot to enjoy in this story and it would be a great book to read the mark the 100 year anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic.

Becky says

an upper class look at the early 20th century

I really enjoyed this book. After a slow start and getting used to the jumps in place and time, I found *House of Velvet and Glass* to be a compelling look at the early 20th century. A book group would find the drug use (opium), the early psychology/sociology instances, the expectations for men and women, dress and table manners, and the social class divide/discrimination would all make good topics for discussion. I found the characters believable and the plot flowed easily. The use of "real" people gave color to the events (Titanic &

Lusitania) and lent credibility to the story. The descriptions of rooms, clothing, manners and social interactions as well as the descriptions of spiritualism and opium dens added to my enjoyment of the story. I started reading expecting "chick lit" and found something much more substantial. As a high school librarian I think many older teens would enjoy the book. The book would work for a mother/teen book group.

Erika Robuck says

"The girl was alone, but the windows reflected a dozen different angles of the back of her head and tops of her shoulders, as if she were guarded by an army of versions of herself, each one slightly different from the last." Katherine Howe, *THE HOUSE OF VELVET AND GLASS*

THE HOUSE OF VELVET AND GLASS, by Katherine Howe, was published in April and is 432 pages. The publisher, Hyperion/Voice, sent me an advanced reading edition of the book. I loved Howe's last novel, *THE PHYSICK BOOK OF DELIVERANCE DANE*, so I was really looking forward to this novel.

The story begins on the night of the Titanic's sinking, and moves back and forth in time from the late 1800s in China to the early twentieth century in Boston. A wealthy mother and daughter die on the Titanic, leaving behind a fractured, grieving, dysfunctional family full of shocking secrets.

When we first meet Sybil Allston, a surviving daughter/sister, she is at a séance with other relatives of Titanic victims, hoping to connect with her dead mother and sister. She has a supernatural experience that both soothes her from her contact with the dead, and opens up a dark world of forbidden explorations and extra-normal experiences.

Her father, Lan, is an aged seaman with tremors and a haunted past, who loves his family, but who is often emotionally inaccessible to them. He and Sybil share a special bond because of their sensibility, and the way they seem to understand each other without lengthy conversation.

Sybil's brother, Harlan, is a college drop out and drunk who ends up hospitalized after welching on a gambling debt. His near death experience turns up a woman of questionable reputation named Dovie, who the Allston's take in to their house while Harlan recovers, and whose influence is not entirely positive.

The characters in *THE HOUSE OF VELVET AND GLASS* are clearly illustrated, realistic, and fascinating, as are their secrets, addictions, and the way their stories are woven together. From the final moments of the Titanic, to the opium dens of China and Boston, to the parlors of seers, *THE HOUSE OF VELVET AND GLASS* embroiders a rich text every bit as intriguing as its title. The multiple time periods and plot twists kept me reading late into the night, and I gasped aloud more than once when secrets were revealed.

If you enjoy literary mysteries with Poe-like settings and unique characters, you will love *THE HOUSE OF VELVET AND GLASS*.

Sherrie says

Quite possibly one of the most boring books I have ever read. The premise of the book was interesting, family still struggling to come to terms with the loss of their loved ones on the sinking of the Titanic. There

is so much more depth that could have been added to this story but instead it was just pages of descriptions that added nothing to the story. I wanted to abandon this book but stuck it out to the end.

Rachel Hyman says

The House of Velvet and Glass began slowly, in a time of mourning. I was struck by the quiet, empty house, the attention to keen details - this sense of being transported existed through the whole book, like the first few chapters built the time period before the figures themselves were struck alive.

The stories woven through the book were beautiful, and the weaving gave a pleasant rocking, like balancing on a boat in calm waters. There were love sagas that crossed class and age; violent stories that mangled and killed; a family struck by addiction and sorrow; and amazing exotic sea adventures. It gave an earnest history of the time, when the break of modernity was crashing hard on the century.

Mainly, this book is about grief: a person's grief, a family's grief, and the grief of a country after a great tragedy. You are pulled deep into Sibyl's despair, and thankful to heal with her, to witness her victories and strength.

The magic of the novel comes from the way the reader is magically transformed. The book itself is a way to scry another time and settle with our own visions of how the world drifts, a hundred years after this novel is set, in the wake of our own tragedies.

Jill Furedy says

Looking at the separate pieces of this story, I feel like I should have liked it better. But everything that had potential is either over or under explained to the point where it's hard to care. The author either bores me with too much info, or just leave it hanging but somehow without any sense of suspense. I read a long way into the book before I realized there wasn't any one thing driving the plot and o I found it hard to care...are we looking for a developing romance (for Sibylline, for Eulah, for Harlan?) for a supernatural revelation, for family conflict and resolution?

So many parts of the story made me think "this is where it will get interesting", but it never really did. I'm not big on the Titanic, but I liked Helen and Eulah. Not sure why the author tried to get in a big "reveal moment " when the name of the ship they are on is mentioned...that was in the dust jacket description, we all knew where they were. They only showed up a few times though, and while I didn't need to see them die, I did think their story would connect better to the main storyline. The history of Lan as a sailor on shore leave in Singapore, seemed cliché...brothels, fistfights, and opium, but knowing from his family who Lan appears to be in adulthood, I was curious to see how it played out. We see the beginnings of the psychic story here, but otherwise don't learn much about Lan. Harlan's injured condition in the first chapters seems like it will have an exciting backstory, especially with the appearance of Dovie. Unfortunately, we did know the cause of it after all and it's not exciting nor did Dovie need to be involved. Dovie, I liked, with her mysterious background and her attitude, but those too, once explained, are rather boring and Dovie loses her appeal as the book goes on. Harlan I basically wrote off as a stock character in the beginning, but by the end I liked him a bit better than I expected to. Betty is introduced, is given some small scenes that again could have been made into something intriguing, but then disappears. Sibyll started off boring and gullible, she's attending seances, which isn't as interesting as you'd hope, dealing with an apparent eating disorder, which seems like

it should become an issue but only resurfaces on occasion, and then she's introduced to opium. This offers the basic plot twist that I would call a surprise, except nothing about the book felt surprising to me. Everything seemed to build up so slowly and quietly, that the few plot twists that do appear seem anticlimatic. Since she at one point had a couple of suitors, I assume there must be something appealing about Sybill, but I never saw it. Not sure why Benton liked her, not entirely sure why he left her for someone else (it's brushed off in a sentence, and never looked back on by way of explanation). I liked Benton and Edwin, and come to think of it, they might be the only two that I didn't wind up disappointed in. I wanted to like this one, based on all the potentially fascinating elements, but it just didn't fully deliver on any of them. I think this one will be much too quickly forgotten.

thewanderingjew says

The story begins in 1912, and then proceeds, in detail, for a period of about five years. Several times, it employs the use of interludes to move back in time, almost five decades, to 1868, to introduce the reader to Harlan Allston's 17 year old incarnation, and foreshadows the things to come. The book improves as you read on, so don't give up if it seems a bit slow in the beginning with the tedium of Boston propriety. The Alston's, a well to do family, live on Beacon Street, at a time when social standing is de rigueur, and the marriage of a daughter was of prime concern. Spinsterhood was often mocked by people of the upper class. Presenting one's child to the world, to find an appropriate mate, was a major undertaking. Harlan Allston, made his fortune in the shipping industry. His wife, Helen, a good deal younger than he, had given up hopes for her elder daughter's marriage. Sybil, a very proper young woman, had refused one marriage proposal and did not receive a second, from Benton Derby, the one she longed for, as he married someone else and moved to Italy. Helen decides to take her younger, more outspoken daughter, Eulah, on a trip to Europe to prepare her to enter society and find a suitable marriage mate. The whirlwind tour is a success and they are very happy when they make their return trip home, unaware of the tragedy to come, on the magnificent ill-fated ship, The Titanic.

The story is a romantic piece of historic fiction, and it covers many of the major events and issues of the time, including many real people that did exist, as well as characters made up from the author's imagination. The sinking of the Titanic, illicit use of opiates and its addiction, the horrors of World War I, the cultural and political climate of the time, are all accurately portrayed. The lifestyle of the gentry is well described, illustrating their carriage and their demeanor, their attention to manners and proper decorum, coupled with the snobbism and prejudices of the day. The early belief in spiritualism and clairvoyance add to the storyline. We witness behavior patterns that go to the depths of depravity, and alternatively reach the heights of heroism. There is an interesting parrot Baiji, that is introduced at the beginning of the tale, in Shanghai, and makes additional appearances until the end, in Boston. It seems to symbolize change and progress, as the narrative moves forward. There is an Asian theme concerning opiates, threaded throughout the book, as well. Ships and water are major themes, as is addiction and clairvoyance or second sight. The sinking of both The Titanic and The Lusitania are catalysts that move the story forward and mark momentous changes in the lives of the characters, moving the story toward its conclusion.

Katherine Howe writes with an easy to read prose, often injecting subtle humor and eloquently describes the grief and tragedy the character's experience. Her characters feel as if they belong in the time of the book and you will easily recognize them and get to know them well. The introduction of ideas that are somewhat supernatural flows well and does not feel awkward. At the end, you will learn of the author's connection to that time period. It would be helpful if the reader enjoyed delving into the supernatural a bit, especially with extra-sensory projection and/or psychic phenomenon, since they are major ideas presented in the book. In my reading, I discovered that in the Chinese culture, the parrot symbolizes freedom and life. It is the bearer of good news, signifies change and wisdom and represents our hopes and ultimate goals. How we live

our lives, long or short, is a very major theme of the book. Were we able to leave a permanent, positive mark on society, did we live the best life we could? Dovie, the unconventional girlfriend of Sybil's brother Harlan, brings the circle of life full circle and explains how the characters have each made their own indelible mark on life.

Heather says

I'm not feeling eloquent enough to give this novel the proper review it deserves. I liked it very much, in some ways more than I expected and in other ways less. I loved the historical setting (both pre-WWI well-to-do Boston and the flashback interludes to the Titanic & the exotic, disorienting back-alleys of 1868 Shanghai) and the detailed writing that made it come to life. I've always been fascinated with the spiritualist movement and early attempts by scientists, psychologists & sociologists to quantify, qualify, and prove or disprove paranormal phenomena. I've always secretly wanted to visit a Victorian opium den so this novel provided me with a "close-enough" vicarious ability to do so. I can't quite put my finger on why, for me, this book falls short of 4 or 5 stars when the plot was interesting, the words well-chosen, and all the elements I enjoy in place. Perhaps I just couldn't get into the mind of the main character Sybil... I felt much more interested in and sympathetic towards the minor characters: Dovie and Eulah, and the real-life-but-fictionalized Edwin Friend & Harry Widener. They were the breath of fresh air in a situation that just seemed too psychically oppressive in tone for me to truly enjoy. I still think the book is worth reading and that others will like it very much, though, so don't let my review discourage you.

Charlotte Guzman says

This book was just ok for me. I felt like it jumped around and when it had its good parts, and I was caught up in the story, it tended to drag on in a description that went on and on. I don't think I would read another book by this author.
