



SEEKING LITERARY LEGENDS

## ‘What do you want us to know?’



PHOTOS BY GILLIAN HECK — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

“A Tell-Tale Haunting” host, creator and executive producer Sophia Temperilli, front left, speaks with, top center, psychic April Busset, right, author Robert Oakes and, center, Springfield-based paranormal investigator Drew Babineau, following a paranormal investigation that sought to connect with the spirit of Edith Wharton at The Mount.

## New paranormal show seeks spirit of Edith Wharton in pilot episode filmed at The Mount

By MATT MARTINEZ  
*The Berkshire Eagle*

LENOX — Seated at a round table adorned with antique cutlery and glass chalices, Sophia Temperilli gathers her paranormal investigators to recap their findings.

A relentless snowfall descends behind them; a late afternoon’s winter glow fades fast in the adjoining rooms. Just a bit longer and the lighting would be perfect for a ghost story — there’s more at The Mount, Edith Wharton’s home in Lenox, than can be told in one sitting, and the investigators have their own additions to that lore.

But the production team of “A Tell-Tale Haunting,” a new paranormal investigation show with a literary flair and focus, is racing against a blizzard. Wharton’s historic dining room provides a fitting setting regardless, its ornate features bathed in warm light from nearby sconces bookending a painting of a cherub; camera operators are maneuvering carefully around the conversation, hoping to capture each speaker.

This is the pilot episode for “A Tell-Tale Haunting,” where Temperilli, host and executive producer, visits haunted locations tied to famous authors with her team of investigators in hopes of learning more about their untold histories. Producer Rick Sasson, of 63rd Street Productions, said the fate of the pilot is undetermined, but the footage shot in Lenox could be helpful in marketing the project.

It’s not the first time that The Mount, a reputed hotbed for paranormal activity, has been the subject of a television show: The Syfy series “Ghost Hunters” filmed there on several occasions dating back to 2009.

A number of authors are on the show’s prospective list of subjects, but The Mount was a perfect place to start. Wharton had fascination with ghosts and the macabre that extended beyond her short horror stories, and few people know that side of her better than Robert Oakes, an author and educator who leads ghost tours at the historic residence.

Oakes lent his expertise to the show, joining the California-based



A 63rd Street Productions cameraman films “The Psychic Housewife of New Jersey” April Busset during a debriefing of an investigation at The Mount. The discussion is part of the pilot episode of “A Tell-Tale Haunting,” a new paranormal show that is seeking to connect with the spirits of literary legends.

Temperilli, Springfield-based paranormal investigator and photographer Drew Babineau and April Busset — “the Psychic Housewife of New Jersey” — in exploring The Mount in hope of learning more about potential paranormal activity there.

At the round table, the investigators listened intently to electronic voice phenomena captured in Wharton’s bedroom, playing and replaying the clips trying to unscramble raspy voices in the static. Busset, a psychic medium, describes energies she picked up on throughout the house, unwittingly repeating details from stories that Oakes has heard in different iterations over the years.

While each of her costars brings their own perspective and expertise to the table, the idea for the show came from 25-year-old Temperilli — she’s been interviewing paranormal researchers on her radio show, “The Ghost Host,” since she was 12 years old, but has developed an interest in direct interactions with ghosts.

Temperilli sees value in attempting to query the long-deceased authors directly and get their first-person perspectives from the afterlife.

“You can sift through books and infer meanings, but it means something totally different when

it comes from the person themselves,” Temperilli said.

She was first inspired by the Apple TV+ show “Dickinson,” which dramatizes the life of Emily Dickinson in neighboring Amherst. The series gave Temperilli a greater appreciation for Dickinson’s story, the time period and her lasting impact on readers through the generations — authors from that era have inspired countless others to create their own art, Temperilli said, and she feels they’re deserving of more credit.

She also wants to give them a chance to correct the record about any misconceptions, noting that celebrities from any era are bound to be taken out of context or misinterpreted through the grapevine. The show’s main goal, she said, is asking the literary luminaries and their close relations what they have to say about their lives that’s “not in the history books.”

“What do you want us to know?” is Temperilli’s central question for the authors. “Not what the public wants to know, not what the public’s been told — what do you want us to know about your story? That’s kind of the theme I want to carry through the show: What is it that you feel has been left unsaid in your life?”

Wharton was a prime candidate

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for further inspection — Temperilli noted her tempestuous marriage with her husband, Teddy Wharton, and the societal constraints she faced in trying to be a writer, as well as her relationship with the paranormal.

Oakes concurred wholeheartedly. “I keep thinking somebody needs to do a biopic about Edith Wharton,” Oakes said. “There’s so much more to [her story] than I think a lot of people know — the sort of balancing act that she was doing between the very rigid and very confining world that she came up in as a woman at the time and the world that she was meant to enter into as an artist and independent person.”

**‘GHOST-FEELERS’**

In the preface to Wharton’s own collection of short horror stories, 1937’s “Ghosts,” she makes pointed reference to “ghost-feelers” — people capable of experiencing invisible currents of energy at specific times in certain places, by tapping into a “faculty” of primordial sense that resides somewhere beneath “conscious reason.”

In the home she built in Lenox, plenty of people claim to have left as “ghost-feelers” since The Mount began offering ghost tours in 2009.

Anne Schuyler, director of visitor services, couldn’t count the number of stories she’s heard over the years, but said there are some eyebrow-raising commonalities in some: repeated reports of smelling cigar smoke in the den of prolific smoker Teddy Wharton. Visitors have also felt their hair being pulled, pats on their head and sharp temperature drops in some areas of the house, among other phenomena.

Long-term tenants on the grounds have observations, too — Shakespeare & Company housed actors there in the 1980s and 90s and some residents claimed to hear screaming in the attic and children playing on the lawn, despite no kids being on the campus, Schuyler said.

Between long-term residents, late-

night cleaning crews and encounters that Schuyler has had herself, there’s an established catalogue of ghosts at The Mount — some believe that Wharton’s longtime chauffeur Charles can still be found on the grounds near the stables.

All those yarns and more are covered during the average ghost tour at The Mount, which are offered annually, from July to Oct. 31 — but there’s also an emphasis on Wharton’s relationship with the supernatural. As Schuyler tells it, the author was terrified of ghosts as a young woman, going so far as to never sleep in a room with a book containing ghost stories and to burn them if she found them in her home until she was in her 20s.

**WHARTON’S FEARS**

That fear began when she first encountered the “dark, undefinable menace” that accompanied her through young adulthood after her brush with typhoid fever at age 9, Oakes said. Wharton carried a fear of ghosts with her through her early life, but researchers believe that her ghost stories were a way to beat that fear back.

“In part, she wrote her way out of some of her phobias by writing ghost stories,” Schuyler said, adding that by the end of Wharton’s life she had accrued a collection with works from some of the best horror writers of the day.

Wharton was also interested in true crime, often reading trial transcripts and accounts; Schuyler believes that she used her own ghost stories as a way to parse through “some of the worst impulses that a human being could have,” while still retaining their humanity.

For Oakes, Wharton’s ability to convert her trepidation about ghosts into powerful vignettes was inspirational — the wisdom and strength she found in her own talents to take things that limited her and use them to her benefit spoke volumes about her resolve, he said.

“There was a treasure in that fear for her,” Oakes said.

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