

## The Redemption of Mattie Silks

**Kimberly Burns**

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*In the historical novel The Redemption of Mattie Silks, a powerful woman plies the sex workers' trade in her favor.*

In Kimberly Burns's historical novel *The Redemption of Mattie Silks*, a Denver businesswoman follows the gold rush to Canada.

In 1892, Mattie Silks's Nighttime Pleasure Resort, with its fashionable and conversant ladies, is one sign (albeit under the radar) that Denver is coming into its own as a cultural and financial powerhouse of the West. When a paper covers a fight between Mattie and another madam, Mattie uses the article's false accusations in her favor. One by one, girls escaping abuse convince Mattie to take them in; they are ready to train in the art of seduction. Mattie sees herself in them—as well as the potential for profit.

And even as enterprising Mattie lifts her staff members from destitution, she has to negotiate between her gambler husband and Soapy, who rules Denver's brutal underbelly. When the new governor's morality codes mandate police crackdowns on Mattie's and Soapy's businesses, they each head to the Yukon territory, following the miners. They hope that conditions in Canada will better favor their ways of life.

Mattie's growing love and respect for the women she works with is evident: she converses with them; she books safe passage for them as they head to the Yukon territory. Her Black maid and Chinese cook, whose contributions are invaluable during their travels, are highlighted for their strength and dignity, subverting dominant treatments of Western heroes. Indeed, the book uplifts and revises stories about those who are marginalized in history books throughout. Enriched by her supportive community, Mattie learns whom to fight for.

The plot is layered, but it is always focused on how Mattie and the pioneers play off of each other. Exemplifying the thought that "redemption and revenge [are] two sides of the same coin," the book's central characters are archetypal: Soapy personifies revenge, while Mattie is a twist on redemption. But the nemeses' conversations are often too coded, with Mattie reading into Soapy's words to discern schemes she can use against him.

Elsewhere, the historical period is fleshed out with focused details, as of Mattie's workers' accoutrements and about an election between a temperance-backed candidate and the laissez-faire incumbent. Scenes from a court case involving a murder and of voting-day violence are microcosmic evidence of the era's square-off between corruption and justice. Expository chapters cover the era's history too; they are juxtaposed with stories about Mattie's business and personal relationships. Competition between Mattie and her opponents mounts toward an enthralling final confrontation.

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MARI CARLSON (September 11, 2023)

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