



***The Maze at Windermere*, by Gregory Blake Smith**
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, April 2018

Gregory Blake Smith deftly blends contemporary and historical fiction in *The Maze at Windermere*. The author, a Carleton College professor, sets his novel in Newport and weaves five converging storylines into one clever maze.

Sandy Allison, the book's protagonist, is a middling professional tennis player who once broke into the top fifty. Often told that he "lacks the killer instinct," Sandy comes to moneyed Newport as the hitting partner of another pro. At a gala after the tournament, a drunken party-goer challenges Sandy to a tennis match, putting up his vintage Indian motorcycle. Sandy, knowing he could beat the amateur easily, has nothing to wager. However, Alice DuPont, the crippled owner of the mansion Windermere, stakes her diamond necklace for Sandy, and he wins the bet.

Soon Sandy is drawn into the DuPonts' inner circle and their life at majestic Windermere. He finds himself attracted to Alice, Windermere's damaged and mercurial heiress. As Alice tells Sandy about Windermere's storied past, the narrative moves back and forth through four centuries of Newport history.

One plot line features Prudence, a Quaker teenager, in 1692. Orphaned when her father's ship is lost at sea, Prudence must fend for her baby sister and the household's young slave girl in the early Newport settlement. Urged to marry a much older man, Prudence strives to follow her heart.

In another story thread, a British officer billeted in Newport during the Revolutionary War becomes enamored with the daughter of a wealthy Jewish merchant. His obsession with the young woman leads to tragic consequences.

Henry James, the famed American author, makes an appearance as a young man visiting Newport in 1863. There he meets Alice Taylor, striking up a friendship which he assumes is platonic. Alice becomes his muse, and later he writes her into one of his novels as a major character.

During the Gilded Age, Windermere's owner Florence Newcombe has a maze built on the Newport mansion property. She and her late husband had admired the maze at Hever Castle during their honeymoon in England, and so she had an identical one constructed at Windermere. Now a widow, Florence is wooed by a fortune hunter with a dubious past.

As the novel winds to its conclusion, the disparate storylines come together with varying degrees of success. Through it all, Newport is front and center as an intriguing character in its own right. Just as John Berendt's novel *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* revitalized Savannah as a tourist designation, *The Maze at Windermere* just may rekindle interest in Newport.