

Alumni Spotlight: Mackenzi Lee

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Mackenzie Van Engelenhoven, who writes under the pseudonym Mackenzi Lee, graduated from USU in 2012 with an undergraduate degree in history. She is an author of *The Monstrous Thing*, which won the PEN-New England Susan P. Bloom Children's Book Discovery Award, and *The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue*, which was a *New York Times* bestseller and winner of the New England Book Award and the Stonewall Book Award.

I wonder if you could tell me a little about your path after you left USU and how you ended up writing YA books.

My last year at USU's history department, I started to realize that what I wanted to be writing was historical fiction, not historical non-fiction. After I finished my degree, I moved to Boston to pursue an MFA in writing for children and young adults, specifically with the intention of writing historical fiction. I chose to focus on kidlit, as it's affectionately called, because of how much the books that I loved as a young person shaped me. Getting to talk to teenagers about my books and hear their thoughts on the books is the best part of my job, no question. After my MFA, it was just a lot of hustle, a lot of hard work, and a lot of writing.

I see that you're also a bookseller. Can you tell me a little about that job and how you spend your days?

Every day is different. I manage the events for the store, so I usually come in mid-afternoon, sit at the bar (yes, our bookstore has a bar, we're pretty awesome) and answer emails—authors with questions about their events, publishers pitching authors to us, ordering books—or doing prep work for events. Then we have an event most evenings, which can range from a poetry reading to a party celebrating Parks and Rec to a murder mystery dinner to a trivia night. It's always different, and involves a lot of running around, problem solving any issues that may arise, helping authors and welcoming them to the store, and making sure the event itself runs smoothly. It's a fantastic job because every day is different, and I love getting to be on my feet, planning creative events, and talking to customers—especially about books.

How did your time at USU help prepare you for the writing/bookselling world? Are there any specific skills that have been useful to you?

I studied history at USU, and so far, all of my books have been historical fiction or non-fiction. The history department definitely helped shape the way I approach my research. And I first learned about the idea of a grand tour—which is the setting for *The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue*—while working as a TA for an honors humanity class taught by Professor Nancy Hills!

What was your favorite part of being a student at USU?

THE BASKETBALL GAMES! (Specifically, singing the Scotsman song at the Spectrum)

What are you passionate about, other than history and writing?

I am passionate about baking, feminism, fashion, Star Wars, and petting dogs.