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NOVEMBER 2021

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# Honoring a Woman of War

Local author helps bring World War II's "greatest spy" to life



Craig Gralley was Chief Speechwriter for three CIA directors. More recently, he used his skills to tell the remarkable story of Virginia Hall.

BY LAUREN STEPP

**Virginia Hall went** by many names. To spymasters, she was Agent 3844. To Klaus Barbie, a Nazi notorious for personally torturing prisoners, she was the “limping bitch.” To the Gestapo, she was the “most dangerous Allied agent.” But to Craig Gralley, Hall was — is — “America’s greatest spy of World War II.”

“Virginia Hall was a woman of fierce perseverance who thought she could have a singular effect on the outcome of France’s liberation from Nazi occupation,” says Gralley, a Pisgah Forest resident. “And she did. She had an impact on the Allies winning the entire war.”

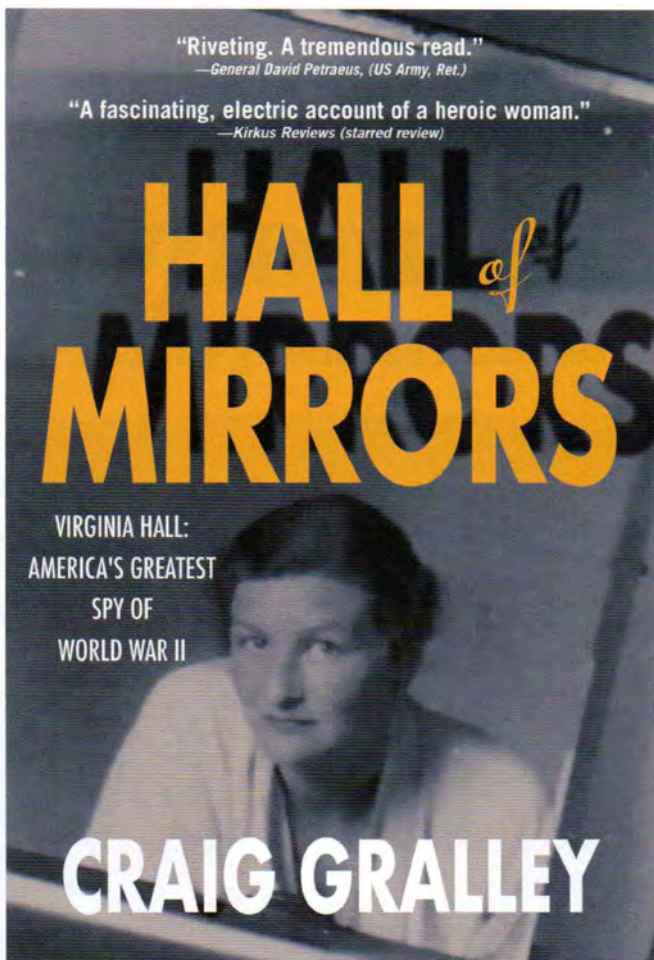
Gralley should know. A former senior intelligence officer with the CIA — and Chief Speechwriter for three CIA directors — Gralley spent years chasing the history of Hall, whom he refers to as a “ghost without a name.” His research led him down long and winding avenues. He scoured declassified documents, interviewed a psychiatrist specializing in physical trauma, roamed the wind-

swept mountains of France, and interviewed Hall’s last living relative, Lorna Catling, who always considered her aunt “a little scary.”

In 2019, Gralley published *Hall of Mirrors* (Chrysalis Books), a historical novel that brings Hall’s unabating grit and ruthless tenacity to life. The book opens in January 1941, when, after scanty training, a one-legged American woman from Baltimore is plunged into Nazi-occupied France. Hall, whose forged documents bore names like Marie Monin and Ana Muller, was the Allies’ first woman spy to live behind the lines of Vichy France.

Posing as a reporter for the *New York Evening Post*, she asked officials probing questions and preyed on their weaknesses. Her goal, writes Gralley, was to “lure the estranged” into her network of spies. But the Gestapo caught on. The bloodthirsty Klaus Barbie — a man responsible for the death of 25,000 French men, women, and children — was especially intent on finding Hall. He drafted “want-





ed” posters and ordered a fleet of Nazis to shadow a woman many considered a phantom.

In 1942, Hall’s luck ran out. As the Gestapo closed in, she was forced to trudge 50 miles through the brooding, snow-capped Pyrenees Mountains to Spain. “I can only imagine the kind of perseverance it took to drag a prosthetic leg through the snow and ice to safety,” says Gralley, who retraced Hall’s route in 2017 and 2019. “I’m a long-distance runner, and, I’ve got to say, that’s a very difficult trail.” (Hall’s leg was amputated in her twenties as the result of a hunting accident.)

Since 2016, when Gralley started *Hall of Mirrors* as part of his graduate thesis at Johns Hopkins University, he’s been intent on providing a reading experience that is both historically accurate and emotionally resonant. Rather than produce a pure biography, Gralley chose to write from the first-person perspective to “dig deeper into the character of Virginia Hall.” He wanted readers to feel closer to this American hero whose uncompromising secrecy has helped her evade the limelight until now, almost 40 years after her death.

“I wanted to give a feel for the true kind of inner grit that’s required of somebody in her position,” says Gralley. “In that way, her story isn’t just a woman’s story — it’s a story for everyone.”

**Craig Gralley**, Pisgah Forest. *Hall of Mirrors* is a Kirkus Reviews “Best Book of 2020.” To learn more, visit [craiggralley.com](http://craiggralley.com).

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