THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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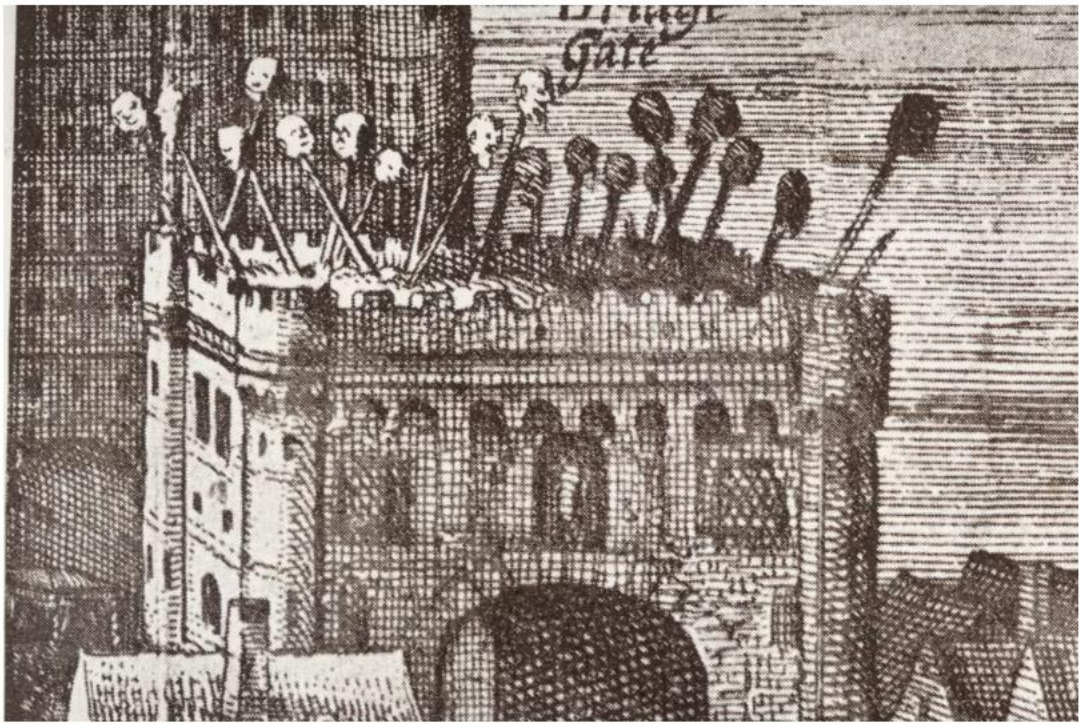
# ‘The Lost Book of Elizabeth Barton’ and ‘The Keeper’: The Deadly Past

History has a dangerous edge in novels by Jennifer N. Brown and Tana French.

By Anna Mundow

April 24, 2026 11:27 am ET




BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

The heroine of Jennifer N. Brown’s debut novel is the only woman in history whose severed head was displayed on London Bridge. The year was 1534 and male heads were routinely exhibited as grisly warnings to those who defied King Henry VIII. But Elizabeth Barton—an illiterate farmhand who became a Catholic nun—was not easily silenced. She claimed to have visions of sinners burning in hell, and when she named Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn among the damned, her fate was sealed.


"The Lost Book of Elizabeth Barton" is a vivid and erudite reimagining of Barton's life encased within a present-day murder mystery that revolves around the discovery of a transcribed account of Barton's visions. "Elizabeth's book was ordered banned and burned," Alison Sage reminds colleagues in 2023. The American historian then announces that she has found the prized volume languishing in a monastery archive.

Within days, Alison is invited to a colloquium of scholars in an English manor that has historic connections to Barton. There are romantic ruins, secret passageways and cryptic clues to hidden treasure. There is also a soon-to-be murderer among the five other attendees, one of whom is an old flame of Alison's, easily reignited. "I've been waiting twenty years to do that again," the handsome folklorist Westley Charney whispers as he kisses her. It is not Alison's heart, however, but her knowledge of the Barton document that places her in jeopardy. As the somewhat predictable plot unfolds, Ms. Brown deftly sketches the main characters: a genial Oxford don, a dog-loving manuscript expert, an elegant Austrian scholar, a pompous Princeton professor. There is an old-fashioned charm to it all. And Alison is the kind of plucky heroine who teases her lover about his research: "Lost treasures, haunted priories, secret maps? I think I saw that movie once."

Alison's breezy narrative is tempered when the novel returns to the 16th century. In alternating chapters that follow Barton from her first vision in 1525 to her execution at the age of 28, Ms. Brown adds historical and emotional depth to her winding tale. Three women form its dramatic core: Barton, who becomes "a kind of human shield in the holy war" between Henry VIII and the Church of Rome; her prioress, Philippa Jonys; and her patron, Lady Agnes Vale. Each life is conveyed in telling detail. Agnes, "who could read and write as well as any clergy," secretly guards her fortune for her granddaughter. Meanwhile Philippa, knowing that "visionaries are ungovernable," fears that Barton's presence in her nunnery portends catastrophe. Ms. Brown's depictions of Thomas More, Thomas Cromwell and other historical figures are neatly woven into the intricate—and blood-soaked—Tudor tapestry. "I will burn for God, girl," Barton's priest and handler tells her, "but I will not burn for you." Centuries apart, both Alison and Barton are manipulated by the powerful. But Alison keeps her head when the hunt for hidden treasure turns deadly.


Tana French's "The Keeper" is the final volume in her Cal Hooper trilogy and a bittersweet reckoning for its protagonist. "He made the mistake, when he came here, of thinking he'd found a place that was innocent," the retired Chicago detective reflects of Ardnakelty, his adopted home in western Ireland. Cal knows better now. But the apparent suicide of young Rachel Holohan draws him back into a familiar web of secrets and lies. Rachel was practically engaged to Eugene Moynihan, the son of a local businessman and political fixer. The two formidable women in Cal's life—Lena, his betrothed, and Trey, his teenage protégée—suspect that Rachel was silenced. "I reckon she knew something," Trey insists, "or she found out something."

The truth emerges gradually and without melodrama, though "The Keeper" has its explosive moments. Ms. French, as always, sustains tension with unfaltering ease before releasing it with expert timing. "Who do you think you're dealing with?" Eugene's father growls in the satisfying denouement. "*I'm the master here*." Throughout the Cal Hooper trilogy, what is said—and left unsaid—is as important as what happens. In "The Keeper" Ms. French once again captures the regional speech and manners that invariably reveal a character. "The first time I saw you, and you a wee baba, I told your mammy: that

one’s got trouble in her eye,” Mrs. Duggan, the town’s venomous oracle, tells Lena, “I been waiting a long time for it to come out.”

Ms. French conjures settings as real as Dickens’s London. There’s Mrs. Duggan’s sitting room, for example, with its “faint, high whistling of the gas fire”; and “the weary clatter of half-hearted washing-up” in a depressing cafe. Nature is equally tangible. “The rain has swollen the river to a thick brown muscle, humped up in the middle by its own force,” Cal notices, inspecting the ground where Rachel’s body was found. Even the solid farmland is in flux. “Take a good look while you can, boyo,” Cal’s neighbor, Mart, says as they survey the surrounding pastures. “That’s the last of it.” Megafarms are coming, he predicts, managed by investors rather than farmers. The final Cal Hooper installment is an elegy to both a lost girl and a vanishing way of life. In a nod to James Joyce’s “The Dead,” Ms. French ends her narrative with snow falling: “into the crevices of the drystone walls, on the backs of the patient cattle, over the curled small creatures and the seeds that wait deep underground for spring.”

*-Ms. Mundow reviews frequently for the Journal.*

*Appeared in the April 25, 2026, print edition as 'Losing Their Heads'.*