



A Peculiar Peace

Lori Hart Beninger

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A Peculiar Peace is an adventure-filled historical romance set on a marriage of like minds.

In Lori Hart Beninger's historical novel, *A Peculiar Peace*, rising abolitionism and romance are set against a volatile antebellum backdrop.

Jack is the trusted agent of a shipping company; Guine, whom he'd known in San Francisco, is a Boston medical student and abolitionist. Alternating between each of their perspectives, the slow-burning story follows their work and undefined courtship, which leaves Guine questioning Jack's intentions across several years. The presence of Virgil, an abolitionist speaker who's from the right social class and whom Guine's family prefers over the part-Irish Jack, leads to a tense triangle.

Social conversations and perilous scenarios illustrate how the 1850s were a flashpoint. From the plights of slaves to prejudice against Chinese and Irish immigrants to Jack's recollections of his time in China, where the Taiping rebellion is brewing, the novel covers ample ground. The American political scene adds to this busy background.

Guine is intelligent and independent. Her forthrightness scandalizes her aunt. She is fearless at using a bone saw, and her medical skill puts her at odds with women relatives' pressure about marriage. Jack's support for her dreams is heartening. Jack is principled, and his modest upbringing seeps through his success. His reluctance to propose slows the story, as chapters are devoted to depicting his wavering mind. Once she and Jack admit their feelings for one another, their union runs true to form, with both risking their lives to help others.

Though its visceral episodes are sometimes loose in their connections, the book excels at exploring period turmoil and people's simmering resentments. It's trouble on the home front that draws forth Jack and Guine's toughness under pressure. Guine is pulled into danger on several occasions because of her medical work among the black community, which escalates when she's caught in the wrong place during a violent hate crime, while Jack has brushes with runaway slaves in his company's warehouse.

Jack and Guine's relationship is grounded in their shared passion for social justice. References to their past in California hint at their longing to return. Their frequent distance from one other prevents their hopes about love from taking solid form. Jack's overseas trips suggest his worldliness, but such forays divert the focus from the main story, and other rapid developments also slow it. Guine's realization that a colleague has been prostituting herself at her husband's behest hints that upper-class society is seamier than it pretends to be, but rather than fortifying Guine's convictions, the side plot feels extraneous. The novel concludes with the abrupt emergence of Lincoln as the Republican forerunner in 1860.

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KAREN RIGBY (March 30, 2020)

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