

A Transcontinental Affair

Jodi Daynard

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The romance of nine days aboard the Pullman Hotel Express gives way to disenchantment when violence on the frontier forces women to choose between silence and freedom. *A Transcontinental Affair*, Jodi Daynard's elegant historical novel, features a fateful 1870 excursion and the love that it inspires.

Hattie is a quicksilver, unconventional Boston Brahmin who wears trousers. Curious about engineering, with a mind that's often likened to a man's, she's an unlikely fiancée to a Sacramento man whom she's only known through correspondence. Louisa is a recently appointed governess whose past is burdened by the Civil War, and by her widowed, protective father.

The train's luxuries are recreated in faithful detail, making the robber baron era both appealing and disturbing when it's juxtaposed against scenes outside the train. Both women feel the constraints of traveling. They strike a friendship that blooms into secretive longing. Their restrained comportment and subdued confessions suit the times, though it's hinted that other passengers spot what's simmering between them. A surprising, sometimes sudden plot echoes the train's movements, replete with stops and setbacks that peel back the glamour of the West to reveal its cruelties, including some passengers' mockery of Native Americans.

Characters gather with vibrant color, from an opera singer to elite Boston Board of Trade members. Hattie and Louisa's place among them is peppered with tension as the gulf between what's expected of them as young women and what they desire widens. When the train is ambushed, resulting in bloodshed, the men on the train conspire to cover up the event. Their corruption cements Hattie and Louisa's decision to flee together.

A fascinating interplay between a privileged society and their impact on the harsh, beautiful landscape deepens the work without imposing modern views. Hattie and Louisa are witnesses with little power, yet they make their stand where they can. In its quiet fortitude, theirs is a brave story of friendship that captures the risk and daring of striking out for new fortunes. Here, the unknown is an alluring adventure.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2019)

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