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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ GENERAL FICTION

Ambrose Bierce and the Queen of Spades

Oakley Hall
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It's the 1880s in San Francisco. Railroads have been built, fortunes have been made, names have been changed to protect the guilty. The political machine runs with nary a snag and the Chinese have been let loose to make the city across the sea their business. Nob Hill already has an "S"on the front of it and the area around Union Square is red-light. Young Tom Redmond joins us from the offices of The Hornet, a weekly magazine edited by the "best—dressed journalist in San Francisco."—Ambrose Bierce.

The novel opens with the gruesome slashing of a prostitute, an ace of spades found stuffed in her mouth. Redmond is sent to the morgue, and so begins his investigation of crime and politics, crime and history, crime and family. A second slashing follows closely on the first, and the playing-card tokens cause hysteria in the female hearts of that oldest profession. The tonier feminine hearts are also set aflutter when the suspect's name is published, for he is one of their own.

Hall is an old pro with the pen, having published 15 novels and six mysteries. He was director of the Graduate Programs in Writing at University of California, Irvine, for 20 years and this year he was presented with the PEN Center West Award of Honor. His novel, Warlock, an historical western, has been in print since it was published in 1958.

This latest work is also historical in nature. Journalist Ambrose Bierce, most famous for his wicked, witty book, The Devil's Dictionary, was actually living in San Francisco during the described time. Hall twists his story through historical fact and face: Ina Coolbrith, Leland Standford, Lillie Coit, Charles Crocker and Mammy Pleasant all play a part in the reality of this fiction. The political and industrial past of the area also cleverly becomes important to the story. Hall's writing is clean and no-frills, like that of young Redmond's mentor, Ambrose Bierce, who often delivers ultimatums on sense and syntax to the fledgling reporter. For those who enjoy the blockbuster East Coast historical thrillers, this is its western sister. Romance, history, atmosphere and sleuthing—it's all here.
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