



Beneath a Marble Sky: A Novel of the Taj Mahal

John Shors

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As any reader of travel brochures knows, the Taj Mahal is a monument built by a grieving widower in remembrance of his beloved wife. Travel Channel viewers may be aware of more detail, like the fact that it was built in 1632 by the Emperor of Hindustan, Shah Jahan, to symbolize his love for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, whom he called "Taj." But only readers of this exquisite tale will be able to gain a thorough understanding of what life must have been like in that time and place, where love was neither easily obtained nor free of political ties.

The author centers his tale on Princess Jahanara, the oldest daughter of the Shah and Mahal, as she tells the story of their great love to her granddaughters. Jahanara also talks about her own romance, but hers was of the forbidden type that's rife with conflict, abuse, and censure. These intimate events are set against the backdrop of the era—a difficult time of war, rebellion, and religious tension. The result is a rich story that informs readers of little-discussed history, but doesn't weigh them down with it. Rather, Shors is adept at letting the parallel tales unfold through his increasingly complex characters. Most touching are scenes like the one in which Jahanara sees the first large sketches of the monument, done by her lover, an architect she can't marry: "It gave life to something wondrous, something he'd called a tear of Allah. To me, the mausoleum became a jewel surpassing even Mother's beauty. Its arches and towers and facades were not of this world."

Shors infuses this novel (his first) with his love of the foreign; after his college graduation, he lived in Japan and then backpacked across the continent, spending a large amount of time in India. Returning to America, he worked as a newspaper reporter in Iowa, winning a statewide journalism award for investigative reporting, and then as a public relations executive. This personal exploration is apparent in the novel, since Shors's descriptions are like those of a passionate traveler who appreciates exotic locales.

Although he brings Jahanara to life gradually, and makes her pain and ecstasy feel real, Shors also creates a vivid and striking world that feels as close as a plane ride. Most important, he manages to convey universal feelings in a tangible and intimate way. Shah Jahan's grief isn't just that of a man who lived centuries ago; it's a well of emotion felt long before Mumtaz Mahal ever lived, and is still felt today. Shors's ability to tap into that well, and make it so alive, renders the novel as luminous a jewel as any that adorn the Taj Mahal's walls. (August)

Elizabeth Millard

ELIZABETH MILLARD (September / October 2004)

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