

Death in Lacquer Red

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In the first of what is to be a series of mysteries with young Swedish immigrant Hilda Johansson as heroine, Agatha Award winner Dams' (The Body in the Transcript) new novel is more reminiscent of Nancy Drew than of most contemporary mysteries for adults.

Still, it is a clever idea for the heroine to be a servant girl for a wealthy South Bend, Indiana, family at the turn of the century. Hilda's circumstances force her to do her sleuthing with more than the average amount of discretion, not to mention forcing her to do it between chores like beating the household rugs and making up the beds. It is a nice touch, even a convincing one, for the author to use the servants' grapevine as the source of much of Hilda's information.

Dams might work at developing characters that have more depth than can be portrayed by repeated references to their ethnic backgrounds. Swedish stubbornness, Irish impetuousness and Chinese quietness only go so far. The plot, centered on the murder of a young missionary woman who recently fled the Boxer Rebellion in China, is passable even if the villain more or less jumps into the net voluntarily at the end. Each chapter is preceded by quotations—from Shakespeare, Mark Twain or lesser literary lights—that foreshadow or comment upon the action, usually humorously.

For reading on a dark and stormy night in an old house, mystery fans might prefer something more substantial. For reading beneath the hot sun on a lazy beach this summer, this might be just the thing.

RICH WERTZ (May / June 1999)

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