

Error of Understanding

Stella McMillan

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For those who believe in reincarnation, the prospect of recalling every detail of a previous existence may evoke fear or fascination. Stella McMillan explores this exciting theme in *Error of Understanding*. It is the first book in her historical trilogy *Era/Error of Understanding*, which is set in Victoria, Australia, during the Victorian period.

Injured in a car accident on the Australian Gold Coast in September 1999, Paula drifts into a transitional realm between life and death while in the hospital. Hovering in an undefined space, she steps one hundred and thirty-two years back in time, emerging along the banks of the Murray River in 1867. This is the era of paddleboats and straight-laced decorum, an age when young women and men were forced into arranged marriages for financial benefit, a situation that some fought with vehemence, including Louisa and Sylvia, wife and mistress, respectively, to Charles Lyndhurst.

This interesting story exhibits all the stereotypical characteristics associated with a marriage of convenience, including love interests that remain out of reach due to social constraints. But McMillan brings her characters to vivid life and exposes the flaws in their behavior, gritty consequences and all, giving the novel a mainstream fiction, opposed to romantic flavor. For example, Louisa compares her wedding to an execution: "My hangman awaits. Escort me there, if you please, Papa...With her head held high and her demeanour that of a queen heading for the gallows, regal and proud to the end, she walked beside him."

McMillan's work deserves a high mark for insightful commentary and social criticism within a fictional context, but *Error of Understanding* falls short in presentation and formatting. An awkward mixture of fonts, unconventional spacing, and an unusual method of alternating from one character's viewpoint to another by identifying them with an underlined name are among the formatting issues that appear throughout the book.

A companion series to McMillan's historical trilogy is a contemporary trilogy titled *Era/Error of Discernment*, which takes Paula back to the twentieth-century life she left behind in America. Though past-life memory and regression to an earlier point from a present existence have been the focus of innumerable commercial novelists, a feminist slant that relies on a humorous, intellectual style gives McMillan's books a freshness not often found in other time-traveling scenarios.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (July 27, 2011)

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