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Clarion Review ★★★★★ HISTORICAL

Hilda and the Ship's Doctor

Erica Bell
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Dark threads of racial injustice underscore the multiple plot points of this detailed historical novel.

Erica Bell skillfully uses a historical backdrop for her compelling fiction in *Hilda and the Ship's Doctor*. During a treacherous sailing trip around islands north of Australia, seventeen-year-old Hilda Kofke bonds with the half-caste first mate.

The first part of the book, set in 1903, takes place aboard ship and on various islands. Hilda joins her father, a government agent tasked with preventing gun trade with the islanders, as they set sail on the *Liberty*, a dilapidated two-masted brig. The ship's crew intends to barter goods for young island natives destined for slave labor in Australia. Misima, the shipmaster's adopted son, serves as first mate and self-taught ship's doctor. Shortly after embarkation Hilda's father dies, and she assumes his official duties, despite the all-male crew's objection.

The book's second part transpires on land, in 1906. Hilda, now a wife and mother, lives in North Queensland. With Misima presumed lost at sea, she faces a frightening illness without his impressive medical knowledge.

Dark threads of racial injustice and the islanders' code of "payback" for past offenses underscore the multiple plot points. Well-placed clues about characters' past actions hint at stories that may have been twisted to suit the tellers' personal motives. Haunted by rumors of atrocities committed by her father against the islanders, Hilda is judged by those who believe him guilty. Misima yearns to know his true parentage but suspects the motives of his adopted father.

Bell makes effective use of Australian and Scottish dialects, seafaring lingo, and the islanders' pidgin English, giving the dialogue authenticity but requiring close reader attention. Words like "pong," "flauntering," and "chittering" enrich descriptive narration. For instance, "They winced as their oars brushed against the mangrove roots where bream and prawns nibbled with furtive flits here and there among those snakes dark-backed to mimic the silty waters from above, pale-bellied to fake the sky from below."

Bell's eye for subtle detail creates an interestingly varied cast of characters. As an example, when the *Liberty*'s crew meets the missionary on the island of Vura, they see a man dressed in white linen, opening his arms to welcome them, as if with Christ's blessing. They shake his hand and note, "His nails were hard enough to puncture a sailmaker's palm skin, and his smile did not reach his pale eyes, which flicked over them as if to calculate some holy sum."

Hilda and the Ship's Doctor offers a historically accurate account of the tumultuous era of the inception of the Commonwealth of Australia. The author's sympathetic portrayal of native characters and the hardships they endured because of European settlers' encroachment on their lives and land provides moving fiction on multiple levels. Hilda and Misima's efforts to close the divide between ethnicities inspire hope for healing those wrongs.

People who admire well-told historical fiction will find this book memorable.

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MARGARET CULLISON (July 21, 2014)

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