

Seven Malas: A Love Story

John Leslie Lange

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Within The Seven Malas are an imaginative handful of affairs and one glowing true-love story.

John Leslie Lange's novel *The Seven Malas* is part midlife makeover, part male fantasy, and part earnest quest.

Thirtysomething James Wilder has survived prostate cancer as well as divorce. Surrounded by dark shadows, he takes up yoga and looks for a new path. You can't blame him for falling for a stunning massage therapist whose raven hair and hand-glittered business cards he takes as proof of deep soulfulness. He's wrong, and Willow becomes the first in a series of lovers who occupy the next decade of James's life as he searches for love, fulfillment, and spiritual awareness—goals that, in his case, aren't necessarily in accord.

James is painted as a complex character whose earnestness and dedication to yoga keep him sympathetic. The women in his life are similarly well drawn, emerging as distinct individuals with intriguing and different backstories.

Each affair is presented as a mala in James's life, a reference to the beaded and tasseled cords used in Hindu and Buddhist worship but reduced to souvenir trinkets by hipsters. The sections are even and interesting, with each woman's backstory revealed across the relationship. The prose is romantic, and gauzy sex scenes add heat and spice. James, convinced he is deeply in love with each new woman, takes to writing poems inspired by Sufi love poetry, but without the genre's subtle twists of language and imagery.

There are few clues as to where the story is leading. James's early affairs seem to have positive effects on him; he reclaims his health and improves his relationships with his children and ex-wife. But even as he grows as a yoga practitioner and master instructor, he seems frozen on the spiritual growth front, taking the wrong lessons, or no lessons at all, from his liaisons. The no-comment stance of the narrator raises the possibility that earnest, likable James may become an aging dilettante, endlessly pursuing youthful beauties—though late in the game, another ravishing beauty, Malena, enters James's life, bringing real responsibilities and a violent confrontation with immigration agents, forcing a tough choice. Though the confrontation itself is over the top, its emotional pitch, and James's dilemma, feel more real than anything that's gone before.

Within the novel *The Seven Malas* are an imaginative handful of affairs and one glowing true-love story.

SUSAN WAGGONER (December 21, 2018)

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