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Mystery

The Chinese Jars
William C. Gordon
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The Chinese Jars is both a breezy, classic noir murder mystery, as well as an entertaining character-rich novel which mines the kind of intrigue specific to a time before cellphones and the Internet, and to a city rooted in old allegiances. Readers will have no trouble visualizing the ruddy mixed group of 1960s good guys, great dames, baffled bystanders (who may be more than that), and hooligans—who, by the way, maybe aren't all bad. The book moves at a colorful clip as newspaper ad salesman turned detective Samuel Hamilton unravels the death of a casual friend, the possible millionaire, and finds himself hip deep in the arcane and nearly impenetrable alliances of a Chinatown that exists just beyond the streets San Francisco tourists typically tread.

As William C. Gordon meanders through a story and time redolent with nostalgia for film, television, and pulp novels of a bygone era, he takes his readers on a slick ride to a place where the underground literally exists, a *Cheers*-like bar occupies center stage, and shady sorts sometimes do the right thing, even if it is for selfish reasons. The author includes the requisite dollop of sex, flirtation, and the danger that ensues when equally powerful men and women retain just enough secrets to keep the amateur sleuth and his well-connected old buddy, the US attorney, guessing and grasping. Someone is smuggling Chinese art and antiquities, someone else is stashing money in unlikely places, someone is selling stolen medical equipment, and someone else is only interested in helping poor Samuel quit smoking—or is he?

Sure, there are a few thin stock characters and transparent subplots, but rather than a letdown, they are an expected and well-honed homage to the genre, and the predictability is balanced with plenty of plot twists and likeable sorts. Surprises and oddballs abound, too—a silent, one-armed servant, an albino, a badly scarred bag man, a closet dweller (not that kind), and an Amazonian love interest. Chances are, Gordon stumbled across the inspiration for his characters and their convoluted capers during his decades as a trial lawyer. Gordon (also the husband of acclaimed novelist Isabel Allende) has penned four noir mysteries, some of which

have been translated to ten languages. *The Chinese Jars* is the first of three in the Samuel Hamilton series, to the probable delight of noir mystery fans.

Lisa Romeo