

The Custody of Sha-Ash'gaz

Gary M. Watts

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The Custody of Sha-Ash'gaz features a strong heroine with more to worry about than home and hearth.

Lieutenant Pauline Bell, playfully known as “Tinker,” is the first female combat fighter pilot in the U.S. Navy. After finishing training in San Diego, she joins her squadron for duty in Hong Kong. Once there, she investigates the murder of an Asian woman who is alleged to have died at the hands of an intoxicated American sailor. Though the sailor is in Chinese custody and circumstantial evidence points to his guilt, the real culprit remains unknown and at large.

Gary M. Watts' characterization of this intelligent, high-impact protagonist is outstanding. Still, Lieutenant Bell lacks a realism that may alienate readers who question her vacillation between status and victimization by her male peers. Consider this scene when she awakens bruised and alone the morning after a sexual assault: “Her muscles ached and her joints cried out when she moved, and she felt drained after tossing about the huge bed all night. Her fitful sleep had been filled with dark dreams and terror. Last night she had felt ashamed, angry, hurt. This morning she felt resolve.”

With all of the trademarks of a quality intrigue novel, this fascinating story is a continuous cycle of conflict with little room for an introspective break. The plot runs at high speed from one tense scene to the next; readers who devour action fiction and enjoy encountering minor characters will find this entertaining. Watts has also woven in a romantic subplot, which softens the intense focus as Lieutenant Bell thinks about and interacts with her lover.

Vivid detail, along with the author's exceptional ability to evoke the senses and bring to life the gritty aspects of a foreign locale, catapult the story to a higher level. In this attention-grabbing delivery, Lieutenant Bell's impression of her surroundings draws the reader in instantly: “Odors of the Orient,’ Pauline Bell thought as she stepped out the Hilton's front door and her nostrils were assaulted by the smells of raw fish, soy sauce, urine, and human excrement ...”

This book is well edited, though occasional typos pepper the text. Additionally, the back cover reveals more than necessary. In fact, it verges on disclosing details best left for readers to discover, such as references to “life and death combat with the Iranian Air Force” and “a deadly attack from the murderer”—indicators of later aspects of the plot line and information a writer should not discuss in promotion, but in a synopsis.

Gary M. Watts worked as a smoke jumper for the U.S. Forest Service before entering the U.S. Navy. After twenty years as a fighter pilot, he retired from active duty and pursued a second career as an airline pilot. *The Custody of Sha-ash'gaz* is his first novel—and a commendable debut at that.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (February 17, 2012)

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