

The Death of a Much-Travelled Woman: and Other Adventures with Cassandra Reilly

Barbara Wilson

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In this lively volume of nine short stories, translator and travelling lesbian sleuth Cassandra Reilly pontificates, potlucks, and puzzles her way across the map: Amsterdam, Hamburg, Dartmoor, Reykjavik and Hawaii. Readers who remember Reilly as the wry, funny, globetrotting protagonist from *Gaudi Afternoon* and *Trouble in Transylvania* will relish these newly collected short pieces. For those who haven't had the pleasure, this group of tales represents a worthy introduction.

The mystery short story genre is a difficult one; stuffing a clever plot, half a dozen characters, a scenic locale, and a worthy idea or two into the space of 20 pages is a daunting task. A couple of Wilson's tales wrap things up more abruptly than the reader might like, but on the whole her stories are surprisingly satisfying. Her characters are deftly drawn, her humor keen, and her choice of situation clever and substantial.

In "The Theft of the Poet," for example, a mysterious group of radical feminist scholars is accused of grave robbing. The corpse of the missing woman poet, it's suspected, might be part of their subversive work for creating suitable monuments for women writers. Or maybe the corpse's still-living, no-good, second-rate novelist husband has swiped the bones as a macabre publicity stunt.

In "An Expatriate Death," Reilly finds that she's the corpse—a washed-up, used-to-be, go-go dancer in a local writer's new mystery. Still very much alive, she goes to his reading to heckle him.

In this collection, Wilson takes a satirical but affectionate swing at feminism, women's publishing, writers, the reading public, and of course—through the eyes of her hardworking, ill-paid sleuth, Cassandra—the lives of translators. As she and her heroine clearly prove in "Murder at the International Feminist Bookfair," the pen is mightier than the sword, especially if it's poisoned.

DOTTIE WEBB (September / October 1998)

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