

The Empress of Graniteport

Roland L. Bessette

iUniverse (Feb 4, 2014)

Softcover \$26.95 (508pp)

978-1-4917-2165-0

A story of prejudice that's realistic, never preachy, this book is an intelligent tale of mystery, suspense, love, and revenge.

Revenge, prejudice, and small-town politics become a lethal combination in *The Empress of Graniteport*, Roland L. Bessette's captivating story of romance, suspense, and the search for justice in small-town, modern-day Maine. It's a story that reveals the culture and beauty of Maine and explores both how far people are willing to go to fight for what they believe is right and how much they will take in the stand against wrong.

When someone from *theyah* comes *heyah* and starts going against "man's law," that's just not "hunky dory" with Ned Bailey. As "the king of Graniteport"—the unofficial town leader who will stop at almost nothing to have his way—he simply won't allow it. "I won't stand for any of them damned fools thinkin' themselves the second comin' with their crazy ideas about change," he says. "They just don't get why things are the way they are *heyah* or understand how we survived so long without what they call progress."

So when Roy Slade, clearly from "away," settles in, the town's powers-that-be determine to put him in his place. Especially once he goes against what's "natural" and takes up with Mae Horvath, a beautiful businesswoman of Chinese ancestry. As their love grows, the flame lit against them turns up to high. Then a deadly mystery really sets the pot to boiling. And when it bubbles over, someone will get burned. Solving the mystery and getting justice won't be easy—even when a sharp FBI agent and his team step in.

Bessette's story starts slow, setting up the characters and cultural setting involved. In some ways, the opening chapters seem like a different book. They have the feel of a Southern novel, in which characters and place are the driving story factors. And the author's writing skills excel at this, creating heroes and antagonists with both flaws and positive traits: "He could be unintentionally insensitive but charmingly self-deprecating." His description shines. He writes, for example, of "shops that feature the bric a' brac tourists would not accept for free at home but happily lug back from faraway." He ignores neither the region's charms, nor its problems. Just about the only flaw is that scenes often change without a break or warning, which can hinder smooth reading.

Sticking with these slower chapters pays off as the book works its way into a suspenseful plot that maintains mystery and tension on several fronts—relationship issues, the fight against prejudice, and solving the crime. It mixes a classic detective game of cat and mouse with regional charm. Though the message about prejudice and acceptance is strong, it's never preachy. It involves an unusually broad prejudice against anyone whose family hasn't lived in the region for decades, even centuries, and especially against those of French-Canadian or other ethnic descent. However, even bigoted people are, at times, polite, empathetic, and even complimentary toward those they ultimately can't accept. Mae proves strong and capable but also charmingly pushy and needy. As people are rarely all bad or all good, such touches create realism throughout.

It's a story of mystery, suspense, love, revenge, and the search for justice that offers a page-turning picture of life in

small-town Maine that's perfect for anyone who enjoys an intelligent escape.

DIANE GARDNER (May 8, 2014)

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