



The Gold Shaper

Philip Atlas Clausen

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The Gold Shaper is a fast-paced, exciting coming-of-age story about identity and the search for a deeper purpose.

The second novel in a trilogy, Philip Atlas Clausen's *The Gold Shaper* puts a twist on the western genre by pairing a yearning for gold with the dramatic story of a biracial young man navigating the early colonial American wilderness. Tense interactions between starkly different characters are the star of this adventure-filled show.

Without having read the first book in the series, it is at first difficult to decipher the relationships between various characters, but after a few pages, each character's singular motivation is made apparent. Sabbah, a Native American man, wants to evict white men from the continent by any means necessary. Dain King, a leader in a nearby white settlement, wants gold. And Petr, King's half-white, half-Native seventeen-year-old estranged son and the story's protagonist, wants to save his kidnapped sister and prevent a war between the white and Native peoples. Petr is pulled in many directions, which constantly shift and amp up the tension of the already suspenseful plot.

At the beginning of the novel, King takes Petr hostage and tortures him in an attempt to get information out of him about the location of his gold. When he ties the boy up in a canoe and throws him down the river—with someone a few miles down to grab him—the canoe is intercepted and Petr is rescued by a group of Native Americans, one of whom is the beautiful Minoah. Petr soon discovers that Sabbah is part of this tribe, and tracks him down in order to find his sister.

Of the very few women characters featured in the novel, one is Minoah, who functions merely as a love interest, and another is Petr's sister, who falls into the damsel-in-distress archetype. The speed at which Petr and Minoah fall in love is detrimental to Minoah's character development as an individual, and Petr's sister, at least in this volume of the trilogy, seems to serve only as a plot piece to keep Petr moving forward.

It is also problematic that Sabbah is often referred to as "the bad Indian," that Native American characters are consistently called "red." Petr considers his Native American heritage a "dirty" part of him and chooses to identify with it as little as possible, except for in a few brief instances with Minoah, such as when she gives him a pair of moccasins that symbolize her wish to marry him.

The interpersonal relationships between the characters—aside from the too-fast partnership of Minoah and Petr—deepens the story beyond its action-filled plot. Especially for Petr, the tension between the two communities and the complex men within them can twist single-minded ambitions from distinct to more than just black and white. Realistic, dramatic dialogue strengthens these interactions and pulls the multilayered plot forward swiftly. The woodsy setting, too, always looms in the background, commingling danger and beauty.

The Gold Shaper is a fast-paced, exciting coming-of-age story about identity and the search for a deeper purpose. Fans of westerns and historical adventures may enjoy this novel and the other volumes in the trilogy.

AIMEE JODOIN (May 1, 2018)

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