

The Hollander: Forbidden Love in Feudal Japan

Dan Westerlin

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A Dutch trading officer enters into a forbidden romance in Japan in the tense historical novel The Hollander.

In Dan Westerlin's historical novel *The Hollander*, an ambitious trading overseer attempts to keep the last Dutch colony afloat as Japan teeters toward isolation.

In 1851, the East India Trading Company and much of Holland's spice trade hovers near bankruptcy. Hendrik sees an opportunity to make money and a name for himself by marrying into the prestigious van Courtlandt family, who are high in the ranks of the company. But one of the conditions of his marriage is that he serve as a trading post overseer for two years.

Hendrik is assigned to Dejima, the only trading post in operation in Japan. All he wants to do is perform his duties and earn the respect of the company and his country. But forces within Japan conspire against outsiders. Taka, sent to Hendrik as a geisha and potential concubine, is instructed to spy on him. Nonetheless, Hendrik and Taka begin a romance together that's further complicated by the arrival of American military forces sent to open trade with Japan.

Hendrik is torn between duty and love. His marriage was one of convenience, but he still sees it as an oath made to God. He wants to keep Dejima afloat and the relations between Holland and Japan peaceful and productive. However, his infidelity with Taka and his difficulty adapting to Japanese culture threaten his plans. He can either abandon his post or stay and risk being killed in internal power conflicts.

While Hendrik's characterization is compelling, the story beyond him is disjointed and disorganized. Its sections are divided by glib titles; they do not flow together, and internally they're jarring, jumping between perspectives at random. Who is talking at any particular time is often unclear; the contributions of single scenes to the larger narrative are also hazy.

Further, people's conversations are inconsistent—sometimes marked by inappropriate humor; at times wooden in their intonation. The romantic scenes between Hendrik and Taka fall flat, too, absent a clear sense of connection, lust, or mutual interest. Neither speaks the other's language; they make little attempt to find common ground. And despite all that he's faced with, Hendrik moves through the story in near stasis; the fate of his colony remains uncertain throughout, yet little is done to rectify this.

In the historical novel *The Hollander*, a Dutch colony in Japan moves through its final days.

JOHN M. MURRAY (December 26, 2022)

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