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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ HISTORICAL

The Necklace

Robert Thomas Valverde
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Envision the turbulent times depicted in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, a classic that has been romanticized despite the portrayal of blatant racism and sexism, but substitute Meiji-era Japan for Civil War America. *The Necklace*, the first in a planned series, opens in the ancient city of Kyoto in 1890. Ichimitsu, a beautiful fourteen-year-old apprentice geisha, falls in love with twenty-one-year-old Roderick Stone, an American entrepreneur with an interest in marrying her and operating his father's mill in her homeland.

This dramatic and emotional novel, rich in historical detail, explores star-crossed lovers. Different cultures meet in an awkward yet touching relationship destined for heartbreak at the hands of a society that subjugates women. With a disfigured twin sequestered in the background, and under the direction of a domineering mother who abides by the rigid structure established for her daughters, the young heroine does not comprehend the enormity of her actions when she accepts a family heirloom necklace from Roderick and dares to consummate their love. Ichimitsu is already promised to another man; she has been sold like a commodity to a patron.

This fascinating, though often plodding, narrative extends beyond entertainment-level reading. An educational tone infuses the book, exemplified by such sentences as, "In 1457, Ota Dokan constructed Edo Castle, also known as *Chiyoda Castle*, at the direction of Tokugawa Ieyasu and became the seat of the Tokugawa Shogunate."

In contrast to its lulling textbook interruptions, the author's exaggerated Shakespearean delivery stretches the realm of credibility. *The Necklace* is an unusual mixture of theatrical overkill and tear-jerking introspection, evident here in Ichimitsu's thoughts: "All she knew was that she had entered a world she had not thought possible—not a world of mountains and streams, of roads and streets, of buildings and towns, but a world filled with an impossible lightness of being, a world where she loved so profoundly and where she was safe to love without fear of loss or shame."

From a marketing perspective, the back cover reveals too much of the plot, to the point of spoiling the story for readers, and the male protagonist is referred to there as Jonathan, not Roderick. Valverde's debut novel would have benefited from cutting unnecessary verbiage and upgrading the packaging, which does not live up to the sophistication of the book.

A native of San Diego, Robert Thomas Valverde earned a master's degree in creative writing from San Francisco State University. He is a screenwriter and teacher.

Despite its shortcomings, Valverde's novel will attract a diverse group of readers, including those interested in Japanese history and women's studies. For readers who love a long and drawn-out affair, this talented author will not disappoint.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (September 14, 2012)

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