

GENERAL

The Painter's Gift

Penelope J. Holt

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Three Stars (out of Five)

*...a new Gospel will emerge early in the third millennium.
Christ's message will remain unchanged but the medium will be
different. Three paintings will combine...to soften and heal the
heart of modern man.*

Claire Lucas is a young widow and an oil painter of middling ability. Plagued for weeks by a sad dream of Benares India she funnels the pivotal image into a work of transcendent majesty. The painting actually radiates heat requiring a dedicated security guard at the Vetch gallery in Soho as people yearn to touch it. Viewers are rapt they go away possessed of an overwhelming calm.

The painter sells *Absent a Miracle* for a life-altering million-five but suffers a paroxysm of regret and tries to cancel the transaction. She meets and becomes fast allies with the forcefully capable Father Karl Brandt a priest on the trail of the three foretold masterpieces mentioned in The Angel Scroll and also Richard Markson an introverted widower of the woman whose likeness Claire keeps seeing. Someone else wants the paintings enough to kill for them enough to invade homes in both darkness and daylight. Claire and her champions have quite a bit of ground to make up.

Insinuations of Vatican intrigue raise questions about access to knowledge. Do scholars or institutional guardians have a responsibility to share their finds? Can great art be private property or should the entire world be allowed a look? Comparison of a few scraps of Christian and Buddhist doctrine suggests a lack of fundamental conflict. A monk named Bodhipaksa helps Claire maintain focus: "There in the gap between the out breath and the in breath beyond all thought we find our true nature."

The story carries from New York to Jerusalem Glastonbury Tor to Siena in Italy. Holt

shows a flair for descriptive detail and has a good sense of when to shift backdrops. Although the goals of the protagonists and their opponents aren't dissimilar an ethical divide differentiates. The ghoulish villain serves his function adequately but shows a stock dimensionality without grey-area modulation.

Penelope Holt born and raised in Yorkshire UK is a permanent transplant to New York state. She works as a marketing and communications consultant. Her pursuits of painting and Buddhist meditation inform and flesh out the story. After the publishing tsunami which was *The DaVinci Code* a mad rush ensued to put out the next Dan-Brown-style breakout—even Dan Brown tried—but nothing on that model has been equally commercial. *The Painter's Gift* nods in that direction but the place of religion in life is more practically divined here. The idea of piecing together a new holy message is appealing the lead character is worth pulling for. This book should combine agreeably with a lawn chair a beach towel and a beverage of choice.