



The Spanish Knight's Secret

Peter H. Christopher

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An interesting premise and a unique blend of modern international thriller with historic warfare make this an appealing historical work.

In *The Spanish Knight's Secret*, Peter H. Christopher brings to life the Great Siege of Malta through the eyes of a knight who fought there, intertwined with a modern-day thriller centered on a piece of jewelry once owned by the knight. Dense with historical information, this novel paints a vibrant picture of one of the most pivotal battles in history.

In 1556, young Juan de Guaras is sent to Malta to enter into the chivalric order, the Hospitaller Knights of St. John. He leaves behind his love, Maria, who is secretly pregnant with their child. Over the next eight years, de Guaras writes to Maria faithfully, describing his daily life and dreaming of a time when their family can be together. Unfortunately, Suleiman the Magnificent, leader of the Ottoman Turks, has other plans; he sends his army to wipe out the Knights of St. John and expand his empire into Europe.

450 years later, in modern-day Malta, Kiyoko Bartolo, a Japanese professor and expert on Renaissance jewelry, is vacationing with her Maltese-Canadian husband when she sees a drawing of a beautiful brooch that seemingly disappeared during World War II. The brooch, originally owned by de Guaras, is rumored to hold the secret to a treasure hidden before his death in the Great Siege. As Kiyoko's curiosity over the brooch leads her and her friends on a quest through Europe, they learn they aren't the only ones interested in the beautiful piece—someone is willing to kill to get it.

The two story lines are woven together well, with clear and smooth transitions from one time period to another. Characters from each are well developed and distinct from each other, with the heroic men of the past balanced nicely by strong women characters in the present. Vivid descriptions of people and places add texture to the story and bring it to life.

As a historical novel, however, *The Spanish Knight's Secret* is mostly history, light on novel. While much is learned about Malta, the Knights of St. John, and the Great Siege, the pace of the story is hampered by wading through a flood of information that, while interesting, isn't necessarily relevant to the plot.

Much of this information is delivered in the present-day story line by characters essentially lecturing each other, sometimes for thirty pages or more, or in moments where characters are awkwardly speaking out loud to themselves. For example, there is a scene where Kiyoko and her husband are standing in a cathedral describing the floor to each other in minute detail.

The sixteenth-century chapters deliver quite a bit of historical information, too, but it comes across in a much more natural way. Because Juan de Guaras is writing to his beloved Maria back in Spain, the detailed descriptions of his life on Malta make sense. His conversations with a newly arrived slave from the Ottoman Empire about their respective cultures are also natural since they are sharing unknown information. These chapters are the most interesting, with

easy dialogue, vivid descriptions of the setting, and plenty of action and tension as the battle rages on around de Guaras.

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CHRISTINE CANFIELD (May 23, 2017)

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