

Elsa Hart

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About this Person

Born: Rome, Italy

Nationality: American

Occupation: Novelist

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born in Rome, Italy. **Education:** Swarthmore College, B.A.; Washington University in St. Louis, J.D.

CAREER:

Writer.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- *Jade Dragon Mountain* (novel), Minotaur Books (New York, NY), 2015.
- *The White Mirror*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2016.

Sidelights

Elsa Hart was born in Italy and educated in the United States, but she has also lived in China for several years. Her debut novel, *Jade Dragon Mountain*, is set in the latter country (albeit in the eighteenth century). The protagonist, a librarian named Li Du, travels to Dayan to meet his cousin the magistrate. There, they will prepare for a festival honoring the eclipse. The emperor is expected to attend, which means everything will have to be perfect. The Jesuit astronomer Pieter van Dalen is found dead just before the festivities, and the local authorities declare the death a natural one. Yet, Li Du discovers poison in the Jesuit's tea, and he begins an investigation of his own.

Several reviewers commended Hart's re-creation of the historical period, and online *Bookloons* correspondent Barbara Lingens stated that readers will "get a very good sense of life at that time, especially China's relations with the surrounding countries, its own minorities and recent history." Page Traynor, writing in the online *RT Book Reviews*, was similarly laudatory, asserting that "the history is fascinating and reveals the world, its atmosphere and the culture of a relatively unknown Chinese period." According to an online *Unshelish* writer, "Hart displays strong writing, smart plot

matched with an economically cerebral main character Li Du. Outstanding research, cannot emphasize this fact enough." Echoing this sentiment on the *Fresh Fiction* Web site, Leanne Davis announced that Hart's "extensive research brings China to life." Davis went on to note: "An innovative story which will drop the reader into another century and culture, *Jade Dragon Mountain* is fascinating both for the backdrop of the story and the mystery itself. Historical mystery fans should seek out this book."

In the words of online *Asian Review* correspondent Jonathan Chatwin, the novel is "a fairly conventional whodunnit, with a diverse cast of characters, each with motivation and opportunity, and the magistrate's mansion standing in for an English country house. As such, it delivers the conventional pleasures of the genre effectively, compelling the reader onward through the narrative towards an elegant solution." Chatwin added: "*Jade Dragon Mountain* achieves an allegorical resonance which enables it to transcend the superficialities of its genre." A contributor to the online *Historical Novel Society* offered both praise and criticism, remarking: "A subplot would relieve the rather relentless pace. Hart's characters are very convincing, however, and the ending is truly explosive." As an online *Reading Reality* columnist put it, "Li Du is both a fascinating and an enigmatic character. ... He is a dogged investigator, but he has no modern forensics to work with. So in the end, he studies the crime, its motives, and even more, the motives for covering it up. In the end, it is all about stories. Not just because his friend and assistant is a professional storytelling, but because it is the way that this crime is meant to tell a particular story in a particular way that leads to the killer." The columnist also observed: "That it just doesn't lead far enough makes for a surprising, and surprisingly satisfying, conclusion to the mystery, and finally wraps all of the events and their motives into a neat little package." Another positive assessment was proffered by Barbara Clark in *BookPage Online*, where she found that "the intricate, detailed mystery never disappoints, but Hart's descriptions set the book apart, illuminating a world for readers to savor. *Jade Dragon Mountain* is a compelling look into an ancient culture driven by intellectual curiosity." Offering further applause on the *New York Journal of Books* Web site, D.R. Meredith declared: "*Jade Dragon Mountain* is both a first class mystery and a cultural experience. Hopefully Ms. Hart is planning a sequel; Li Du and Hamza are characters too good to be discarded after only a single book."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, August 1, 2015, Jen Baker, review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*, p. 34.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, September 21, 2015, Denise Hassanzade Ajiri, review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, July 1, 2015, review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, July 20, 2015, review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*, p. 168.
- *USA Today*, September 29, 2015, Charles Finch, "Follow This Twisty Trail of Mysteries," p. 2.

ONLINE

- *Asian Review*, <http://www.asianreviewofbooks.com/> (January 2, 2016), Jonathan Chatwin, review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.
- *Bookloons*, <http://www.bookloons.com/> (March 29, 2016), Barbara Lingens, review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.
- *BookPage Online*, <https://bookpage.com/> (September 1, 2015), Barbara Clark, review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.
- *Elsa Hart Home Page*, <http://www.elsahart.com> (March 29, 2016).

- o *Fresh Fiction*, <http://freshfiction.com/> (September 2, 2015), Leanne Davis, review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.
- o *Historical Novel Society*, <https://historicalnovelsociety.org/> (March 29, 2016), review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.
- o *New York Journal of Books*, <http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/> (March 29, 2016), D.R. Meredith, review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.
- o *Reading Reality*, <http://www.readingreality.net/> (September 25, 2015), review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.
- o *RT Book Reviews*, <http://www.rtbookreviews.com/> (March 29, 2016), Page Traynor, review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.
- o *Unshelish*, <http://unshelish.org/> (March 29, 2016), review of *Jade Dragon Mountain*.

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