

An obvious enchantment

Kevin Patrick Mahoney

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This novel starts off in Egypt. Ingrid Holtz is on the trail of the Pharaoh Hatshepsut, one of the most intriguing kings in Egyptian history, mainly because she was in fact a woman. Ingrid seems to be prone to impulse and boredom - she had originally begun her research on Akhenaten, the Pharaoh who abolished all the Egyptian gods and introduced monotheism and worship of the sun, paving the way for Egypt's acceptance of Christianity. Her mentor, Professor Nick Templeton, is working on similar lines, but has disappeared whilst researching on the Swahili coast. Rather improbably, Ingrid persuades her faculty to let her go to Pelat Island too. As the board notices, Ingrid's quest seems to be for Templeton himself, rather than research into monotheism. Templeton believes that Islam was brought to the Swahili coast by an African King, three centuries before Persian traders supposedly did so. Ingrid is interested in drawing links between this African King and Akhenaten. However, Templeton has a tendency to lose himself in his work, and no one can be sure of the validity of his claims for such an African King. His research methods, although often brilliant, are quite unconventional. Ingrid arrives on Pelat, but there is no sign of Templeton. Neither is Finn Bergmann visible, with whom she has already had a brief fumble. Finn is the son of the founder of the Salama Hotel, the main point of Western civilization on the island. It's not long before Ingrid finds that the island has been divided into two communities by the arrival of the hotel. There's the community that supports and works in the hotel, and the community that abhors it. Like many of the inhabitants, Finn spends his time emptying a perpetual glass. This is one place where Islam and alcohol mix uneasily. There are also other, less Western drugs, that are consumed upon the island - Miraa is a kind of amphetamine. There are hints that Ingrid may be in love with Templeton to some degree. She certainly finds out where he has been staying soon enough, but discovers only his papers. Her search is also hindered by the fact that Finn seems indifferent to her now. There's also Danny, but he's even more drunk than Finn. Ingrid stays in Abdul's house, where she is intrigued by glimpses of Abdul's new wife. She's permanently attended to by Ali, whether she likes it or not.

On the far side of the island, Stanley Wicks is also building a hotel. Stanley has a troubled relationship with his wife, and suspects her of sleeping with her personal trainer, who's called Adolpho. None of the English characters in the book are particularly savory. Stanley is likeable enough, but he seems to have been drawn from quite a stereotypical American view of the English - one of the stumbling blocks to his marriage, we are told, is that he and his wife come from different classes. By the end of the book, you cannot help but feel more than a little sorry for Stanley, even although a misdeed of his forms the catalyst of the book. Less sympathetic is Templeton, who's only seen briefly throughout. Ingrid

seems to represent a bumbling, naive America, fresh and new when compared to a decayed and crumbling Europe. The Anglo-Africans seem to have lost their sense of identity, unsure of whether they are European or African. Although colonialism also runs through Ingrid's blood, she puts on a much brasher front, because she's part of the majority in the US.

Ingrid treads carefully, which is just as well, because she is always limping for one reason or another. She picks up clues here and there, both concerning Templeton's African King, and Templeton himself. Finn observes that like many academics, she seems to pull facts from the air. At the beginning of the novel, Louis asserts that the famous Egyptian pyramids were built in the pattern of the Belt of Orion. Yet one feels uneasy about this, because such ideas are still in the realm of Graham Hancock's pseudo-science, and have not been accepted by serious academics, to my knowledge. But then Templeton questions the very foundation of truth and facts in the book, since his truth seems more dependent on faith. Extracts from the Koran abound in the book, and another mystery emerges: why is there such a schism between the faiths when many of them share the same tales? This is an intriguing book, often difficult to get to grips with, and far more rewarding on the second or third reading. It's not perfect - perhaps some more of the book could have been excised, and it does lead to quite an unusual conclusion. Perhaps Tucker Malarkey's writing is a bit too subtle at times, and a tad over-ambitious. I couldn't help thinking of Patricia Highsmith's 'The Tremor of Forgery' as a comparison, and Highsmith's is the more compelling book and much more satisfying. The delights of *An Obvious Enchantment* are much harder to dig for, despite the title - but please do it read it again.

Authortrek rating: 7/10

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"How cleverly Tucker Malarkey refashions the quest novel, and what a world of mirrors and mysteries she creates. I would happily have followed her heroine anywhere. *An Obvious Enchantment* is as seductive as its title promises."

MARGOT LIVESEY

"An exciting, intelligently imagined story, well written and well paced, with a very skillful use of place and atmosphere."

PETER MATTHIESSEN

"As the mystery unfolds, Malarkey raises intriguing questions about the actions that passions drive us to -- with profound or searing consequences."

KIRKUS REVIEWS

"A mystery whose clues are found in the pages of the Koran, a love story, and a quest that is nearly Ingrid's undoing. It's a stunning accomplishment for a first time novelist."

THE SEATTLE TIMES

“As the island air thickens, Ingrid’s academic universe collides with the reality of ancient feuds and modern compromises, making this novel, with its shades of Bowles, Maugham and Jacqueline Susann, an edifying -- and, yes, enchanting -
- tale.”

LOS ANGELES TIMES

“Ingrid is smart, driven and attractive, an amateur sleuth on the trail of her own obsessions. She’s daring and determined, and a little naïve. She reminds me of all the reasons I once loved the fearless and compulsive world of Nancy Drew.”

PORTLAND MERCURY

“An exotic tale of escape and adventure with a sexy, feminist twist. It’s an addictive book.”

THE HARTFORD COURANT

“Other women dream of fleeing the country for a tropical island; anthropologist Ingrid Holtz does it -- with a grant to follow her revered professor, Nick Templeton, to an island off the Kenyan coast.... You’ll be riveted by this romantic adventure novel.”

GLAMOUR

“A gripping novel pulls you in, keeps you turning the pages long after you should have turned out the light. Such a book leaves you feeling satisfied, yet wanting more.... Tucker Malarkey is a writer to watch. She writes beautifully... and has a way with words.”

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

“Every once in a while, an author forces me to slow down and pay closer attention... That is what I call reading. It happened again this week, when I began Tucker Malarkey’s debut novel, *An Obvious Enchantment*... It put me in mind of a David Mamet play, wearing its intellect on its sleeve... readers will be caught up in the book’s overriding thematic concern: desire -- its many manifestations, the pursuit of the same and its consequences.”

TACOMA NEWS TRIBUNE

“The real pull of this tale is in the prose. Malarkey conjures a fine, ominous sentence... she deepens and enriches her tale with interesting characters, wonderfully odd stories, and a sense of impending mystery.”

THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

“Malarkey creates a captivating character who commands the reader’s

attention... a solitary, vulnerable and complicated figure. It is hard not to get caught up in the hypnotic swirl of the mystery.”

CHICAGO NEW CITY

“Religious mysticism, cultural anthropology and contemporary women’s issues charge Malarkey’s affecting first novel, an uncommon romance charting the restless intellect of an obsessive academic. Ingrid is a complex and seductive character... her preoccupation with truth invests this multifaceted, ambitious debut with a contemporary relevance.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (STARRED REVIEW)