

TURKISH DELIGHT: THE OTTOMAN MYSTERIES OF JENNY WHITE

Historical mysteries are a major subgenre of crime writing today, and aficionados agree that Jenny White is one of the best at the form. Immigrating at age seven to the United States from Germany, White lived in New Rochelle, New York, attending Lehman College in the Bronx. In 2006 Norton published her first novel, *The Sultan's Seal*, set in Istanbul in 1886 during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire. *Booklist* named it one of the ten best first novels of the year, one of the top ten historical novels of the year, and it was a finalist for the Crime Writers Association's Ellis Peters Historical Crime award. She followed this exciting debut with *The Abyssinian Proof* in 2008 and *The Winter Thief* in 2010, when she consented to this interview.

J. Madison Davis: Why Turkey? As a German American, how did you first become interested in Turkish society and culture?

Jenny White: While in college in New York, I did a year's study abroad in Kiel, Germany. I spoke the language, but this was the first time I had been on my own away from my family in southern Germany. Kiel is in the far north, and I found the Germans in the dorm to be rather standoffish—perhaps because of my barbaric Bavarian accent. I was befriended by some Turks who lived in the same dorm, the first Turks I had ever met. I became interested in Turkey and followed up on a tip about a good



graduate program at Hacettepe University in Ankara, the capital. I was interested in studying cross-cultural social psychology, and it seemed like a good idea (don't forget I was in my twenties!) to just get up and go to Turkey to study. I finished

college and then went to Ankara. I don't think I even knew what a Muslim was, or that there was a quasi-civil war going on in Turkey.

I found all that out by stumbling over it, being nearly run over by an armored personnel carrier. I

was wandering along a boulevard, carrying my laundry, amid a crowd of people who were chanting. A stranger pulled me out of the way at the last moment. As a naïve American, I had of course assumed the vehicles would stop. Anyway, I had lots of adventures and adopted the country, made friends, learned the language. And the rest is history. Or rather fiction.

JMD: What led you to begin writing crime fiction set in that particular time period?

JW: Nostalgia is part of my motivation for setting the series in the 1880s, before the violent upheavals that tore the country apart. They began as little as ten years later with the first Armenian massacres in Istanbul in response to Armenian revolutionaries blowing up the Ottoman Imperial Bank. (I begin *The Winter Thief* by blowing up that very bank, but under slightly different circumstances.) In the 1880s the Ottoman Empire was a truly multiethnic, multinominational empire. Jews, Armenians, Greek Orthodox Christians, Muslim Turks, Arabs, people of all faiths from the Balkans, European “Franks,” and many others mingled in the streets and in households.

It was a period of profound social and political change. Educated and wealthy urbanites were acquiring European customs and technology. Some were interested in European political models, like a parliament. Despite European support for the independence movements that were breaking the empire apart, many young Ottomans admired European political values, science, and ideas about society. Some Ottoman leaders also felt they could only fight European attacks by emulating their enemy. And the enemy was closing in. The Russians had taken over part of the empire’s eastern provinces; Britain was arming the Arabs

in the south and encouraging them to break away. The same thing was going on in the Balkan and European provinces. When a province became independent, there would inevitably be bloodbaths and traumatized refugees streaming into Istanbul.

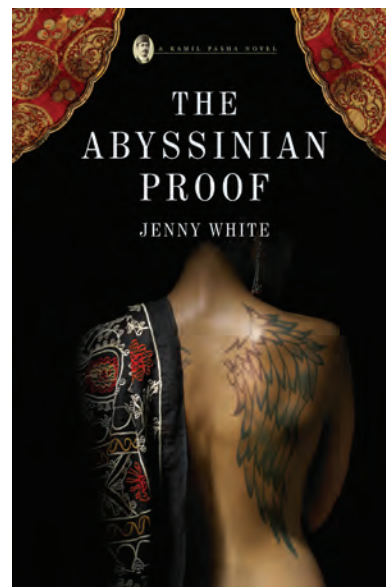
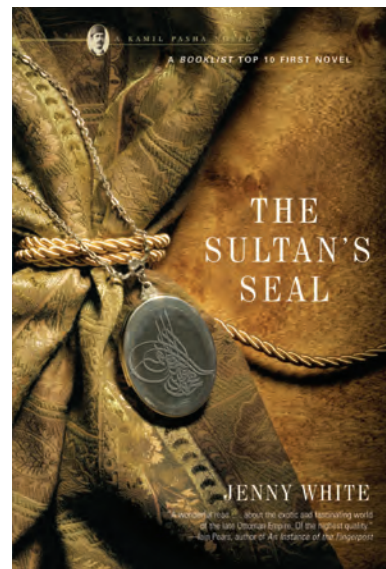
In the 1880s you could see the shape of the future, but it hadn’t taken on a concrete form yet. People were trying out new roles. My main character, Kamil Pasha, like his fellow Ottomans, is worried about the consequences of change, the decline of the family, losing the moral fiber of society. He fears the chaos and bloodletting that the weakening of state power would bring about. He’s continually confronted with evidence that the darkness in people’s hearts is barely kept at bay by the law, and that terrible things are massing on the horizon.

JMD: Are there any particular writers that influenced your approach or served as models or inspiration for your novels?

JW: The historical mysteries of Donna Leon, Robert Van Gulick, Laura Joh Rowland, and Boris Akunin. The puzzle mysteries of Arturo Pérez-Reverte. I also enjoy historical novels: Sarah Dunant, Gail Tsukiyama, Diana Gabaldon. For inspiration in writing: Sarah Waters, John Le Carré, Cormac McCarthy. Poetry. There are many others. I’m a voracious reader.

I try to create an entire, fully imagined world in each of the books, which is a bit different from the classic mystery series, which has a more limited, though equally satisfying palette that is reproduced in each book. My aim is to capture anyone who loves a good read.

JMD: As an anthropologist, you have closely studied contemporary Turkish culture. How would you char-



acterize the state of Turkish culture today? Is it torn between West and East?

JW: I find the differentiation between West and East to be misleading in the case of Turkey. Many people in the West would assume that the people with an Islamic background would be anti-West, anti-EU, anti-globalization, but in Turkey that’s not the case. The AKP, the Islam-rooted party that is in power (elected by a landslide in fair elections), is



pro-EU and is working on meeting the criteria for membership. The AKP believes EU membership will make it easier to institute religious rights—individual rights that, for instance, would make it impossible to ban wearing a headscarf to university, as is presently the case under the Kemalist-dominated system. The EU membership process also reduces the power of the army.

Parts of the secularist state bureaucracy and the army have been in positions of power since

the founding of the republic, and have several times brought down elected governments they thought were straying too far from the ideals of Turkey's founding figure, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The Kemalists believe that allowing the introduction of religion and ethnicity (like Kurdish identity) openly into Turkey's public sphere will undermine the country's unity and cause it to split apart. The AKP is undercutting their authority. Over the past few months, more than fifty officers,

some of them high-ranking generals, have been arrested, accused of plotting a coup against the AKP. Tensions are very high right now.

The AKP and its supporters are also pro-globalization. The members of the new pious Muslim classes that have risen to political and economic prominence since the 1980s have set up huge businesses with global reach. The AKP government is busy making economic ties with many disparate nations in order to secure Turkey's economic and political security. The AKP believes that Turks are the inheritors of the Ottoman Empire, so why should there be a problem with boundaries?

The Kemalists are still focused on 1923—when the Europeans undermined the Ottoman Empire—and they remain suspicious of the intentions of the West, despite sharing a secular, westernized lifestyle. Some Kemalists are anti-globalization because they think Western ideas like freedom of speech will come in and, as a result, they will no longer be able to control divisive forces and things will fall apart. The courts have tried to control the Internet; YouTube has been banned for a couple of years.

I'm not letting the AKP completely off the hook either. They are extremely conservative. They've passed laws that give people individual rights, but they don't enforce them. For instance, there are improvements of women's rights on the books, but only 26 percent of women work, and there are very few women in politics. Conservative attitudes toward women, however, are widespread among secularists as well.

I would agree that this is a kind of normalization, since most of Turkey is very conservative and pious. Those cultural and social characteristics are now being expressed in politics, and a pious lifestyle has

come out of the village and become a symbol of upward mobility, with chic veiled fashion runway shows. The president's and prime minister's wives are veiled. There is a vital economy—lots of entrepreneurial activity by pious and secular people. This is certainly a result of the process Atatürk began. Without the structure of the state he set up and a democratic government, none of this would have been possible, especially in such a relatively peaceful manner. But I'm not sure such a conservative Turkey is what Atatürk envisioned.

JMD: So you're saying European and American societies misunderstand contemporary Turkish culture and identity?

JW: Europeans tend to think Turkey is an agricultural backwater. Americans who know little about Islam lump all Muslim countries together and assume that Turkey is like Saudi Arabia, then are surprised when they go to Turkey to discover a vibrant, friendly, and relatively open, globalized society.

In the nineteenth century, Turkey was called "the sick man of Europe"—not of the Middle East! It used to be a powerful empire that ruled North Africa, the Middle East, and southern Europe for six hundred years, ending only in 1923 when a republic was declared in what remained of the empire after World War I. So Turkey has a very distinct, self-confident sense of itself. It was never colonized; it *was* the colonizer. The empire *decided* to westernize; that wasn't something imposed by Western colonial powers. So the whole dynamic regarding attitudes toward what we think of as westernization is different. Turks think of it as being Turkish and debate it on those terms, rather than rejecting secularism or Western lifestyles because they were imposed

on them, as many Arab societies have done.

JMD: Do you find you sometimes have to compromise your own extensive knowledge of Turkey in order to "get on" with your stories, either by simplifying complex issues or avoiding issues that you suspect might be misunderstood by your readers?

JW: I try to be as historically accurate as possible. I did a huge amount of research on every detail of *The Sultan's Seal*, down to the type of cobbles on the streets and the old street names. A historian friend checks the historical background for any big bloopers. I do try to simplify the politics, without being inaccurate.

Some mistakes get through, but are caught by readers. Sometimes I can fix them for the paperback. I had been incarcerating people in Sultan Ahmet prison, but recently discovered that it hadn't been built until after the turn of the century. So I looked into prisons, only to find that the whole concept of the prison hadn't come to the empire yet in the 1880s. They threw people into towers or exiled them. I did manage to find a former military camp that was used as a prison, though, and was greatly feared. So now I lock people up in Bekir Agha prison. It takes a lot of time to be that thorough, and it does mean that it takes longer to write a book. That sort of obsessiveness about detail and accuracy is probably a spillover from my academic work. Luckily, I can now rest somewhat on my research laurels. At least I don't have to look up cobbles or prisons anymore.

JMD: What is the state of crime writing in Turkey?

JW: There are Turkish crime writers, at least one of whom, Mehmet Somer, has recently been translated

into English. The Turkish police force doesn't have a detective position, although there are private detective agencies, and sleuths come in all shapes and sizes. Somer's sleuth is a compassionate, slinky transvestite. The genres aren't as specific in Turkey. My first two novels have been translated into Turkish (as have my scholarly books), but I don't know how well they're doing. Once the books leave the writer's hands, they become commodities wandering the world marketplace, never writing home.

JMD: Do you think you'll continue your series? Do you see a long string of future novels stretching out before you?

JW: I set up *The Winter Thief* to leave the reader hungering for more (I hope). I'm also thinking about writing a contemporary thriller. But at the moment, I'm writing a nonfiction book about nationalism and Islam in Turkey. If only I didn't need to sleep. . . .

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Editorial note: Jenny White's website (www.jennywhite.net) offers more information about her writings. She also writes an informative and interesting blog about contemporary Turkey at www.kamilpasha.com.

J. Madison Davis is the author of eight mystery novels, including *The Murder of Frau Schütz*, an Edgar nominee, and *Law and Order: Dead Line*, which was an e-book best-seller. He has also published seven nonfiction books and dozens of short stories and articles. His column on international crime writing has been appearing in *WLT* since 2004. In 2008 he was elected president of the International Association of Crime Writers.