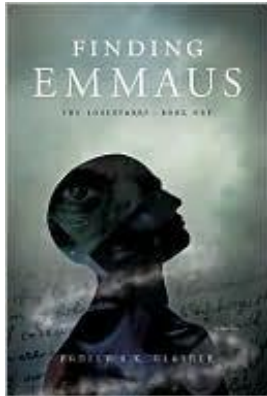


“I find it hard to believe that this is Glasner’s first novel; it’s written with an assurance and style that seem like the product of years of published writing experience—far removed from so many first novels.”



A book review that started through Twitter. A fellow-tweeter and author (who happens to live only two stations up the line from me here in Japan), Christopher Belton, wrote a review of a first novel by Pamela Glasner that piqued my curiosity and, thanks to his review, I ordered it from Amazon. He has since interviewed Glasner, who talks more about the book here.

Described as a “dark historic fantasy” on the book’s Web site, *Finding Emmaus* is far removed from the “sword and sorcery” type genre (Glasner complains that she is often asked if her books are “like Harry Potter”. They’re not.). It actually tells the stories of two lives, running in parallel, but separated by several hundred years. Francis (“Frank”) Nettleton, scion of a wealthy 17th-century Colonial family, discovers the truth about his fits of seeming depression (his “dark days”) which, as he finds out more, turns out also to be the truth about a surprising number of people, who go about their lives in a state of terror—the terror that comes from the results of being diagnosed as insane or possessed by the devil; torture or death at the hands of the self-appointed cleansers of society.

Katherine Spencer, a 21st-century property developer, finds herself troubled by the many of the same fears as Frank, and finds herself being drawn closer and closer to him as she flees from the 21st century’s equivalent of Bedlam—the psychotropic drugs overprescribed by doctors in an attempt to cure what is seen by the medical industry as mental illness.

As the story progresses, the results of Frank’s life work, his Lodestarré (guide) to aid those who are cursed or blessed with the special gift of Empathy, becomes a near-obsession with Katherine and those around her as she settles into the house where Frank lived and worked centuries before.

The plot twists and turns through the lives of Katherine and those around her, taking in the lives and passions of her friends, the bombshell she explodes under the US pharmaceutical industry, and the diagnosis and treatment of mental patients. Since Glasner has described *Finding Emmaus* as the first of a trilogy, I did discover that the end of the book leaves a number of loose ends untied (good – it makes me want to read the rest of the series) but rushes somewhat to tie up others, compared with the more leisurely pace of the rest of the book.

When I first started reading, I found the style a little difficult to get into – not that it’s self-consciously literary, but it’s very much more concerned with the characters’ interior thoughts and feelings than my usual reading fare. On reading further, it’s obvious why this is so—the plot is so concerned with the characters’ interior lives that the story had to be told from the inside.

Although I do understand why this has to be the case, I found Frank’s 17th-century persona to be too 21st-century, and his language to be too close to our own present-day dialect for my taste, at least. Although it’s hard to read, and harder to write, in a style similar to (say) Pepys or Defoe for extended periods, Frank’s language, as well as his 21st-century sensibilities and reactions, jarred at times with the little I know of that period of American history and society.

One writer’s works with which I might compare *Finding Emmaus* are those of Robertson Davies; in its historical sweep, involving a broad cast of characters spanning different periods, and with an emphasis on the spiritual, books such as *Murder and Walking Spirits* come to mind. I find it hard to believe that this is Glasner’s first novel; it’s written with an assurance and style that seem like the product of years of published writing experience—far removed from so many first novels.

The physical book itself caught my eye as an example of the bookmaker’s art. Glasner apparently chose many of the design features herself; for example, the chapter headings are backed by a faint underprinting of a 17th-century manuscript. The typeface is clear and adds a classic feeling without being self-consciously Olde Worlde (and the dreaded fake deckle edge has been avoided). Maybe book design doesn’t mean that

much when ebooks seem poised to take over the world, but for those of us who grew up with sliced dead trees, this is a good example of what can and should be done to match the physical book with the contents.

So, my main question now is: when are the next two volumes coming out? I know that Glasner has another project bubbling away, but I hope that Katherine and Frank aren't being pushed too far onto the back burner. I'm looking forward to finding out what happens next (and isn't that the ultimate test of what makes a good book?).

~~Hugh Ashton, author of *Beneath Gray Skies*~~