

[PDF] The Gods Of Heavenly Punishment: A Novel

Jennifer Cody Epstein - pdf download free book

Books Details:

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Author: Jennifer Cody Epstein

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Description:

Review “The Gods of Heavenly Punishment is a page-turner thanks to its high-stakes adventure, torrid love affairs and characters so real they seem to follow you around. And in the end, this gripping novel asks us not just to consider a lost chapter of a famous war but also to explore what it means to be lucky—and what it means to be loved.” (**Amy Shearn - O Magazine**)

“The Gods of Heavenly Punishment showcases war's bitter ironies as well as its romantic serendipities.” (**Megan O'Grady - Vogue**)

“An epic novel about a young Japanese girl during World War II underscores the far-reaching impact

that the decisions of others can have.” (**Kirkus Reviews**)

“Jennifer Cody Epstein’s triumphant second novel is a big, visceral, achingly humane portrait of wartime Japan and several Americans charged with building and destroying it. The sweep of Epstein’s vision is matched by her empathetic attention to the smallest details in the lives of the people who inhabit it.” (**Jennifer Egan, author of A Visit from the Goon Squad**)

“Jennifer Cody Epstein depicts the firebombing of Tokyo and concurrent events in unflinching but delicately rendered detail. Immaculately researched and deeply imagined, this is an astonishing novel whose battles and intimate encounters alike carry the force of electric jolt. I have never read anything else like it.” (**Angela Davis-Gardner, author of Butterfly's Child**)

“I dare you to read this and not be swept up. The Gods of Heavenly Punishment is shocking and delicate in equal measure.” (**Debra Dean, author of The Mirrored World and The Madonnas of Leningrad**)

“Beautifully researched and evoked, The Gods of Heavenly Punishment brings to haunting, dramatic life one of the most destructive acts of warfare ever perpetrated. In its passion and sweep, this lovely book does artful justice to the profound, contradictory connections between victims and victors, public histories and private lives.” (**John Burnham Schwartz, author of The Commoner and Reservation Road**)

“With the drama and sweep of The English Patient and a rich, painterly sensibility all her own, Jennifer Cody Epstein has created an indelible portrait of the war in the Pacific, seen through the eyes of six characters whose stories will haunt you long after the final brush stroke.” (**Hillary Jordan, author of Mudbound**)

From the Author Janice Y.K. Lee Interviews Jennifer Cody Epstein

Janice Y.K. Lee is the New York Times best-selling author of The Piano Teacher, which was also a New York Times Editor's Choice, a Richard and Judy Summer Read pick in the UK, and was published in 24 languages.

Jennifer, it's so lovely to talk with you about your wonderful novel, The Gods of Heavenly Punishment. I am a big fan of The Painter from Shanghai, and it was great to delve into another world with you.

Thanks! And right back at you—as you know I was a huge fan of The Piano Teacher. It completely transported me—definitely among my favorite novels over the past few years!

What is your attachment to Asia and Asian stories?

I think it stems from the fact that Asia was the first place I traveled to internationally, and subsequently was where I spent much of my twenties and early thirties.

My first experience there was as a homestay student in Kyoto during my sophomore year in college. I’d initially wanted to go to London, since I was madly in love with English literature. But my father—who had visited Japan on business—managed to convince me that I’d get much more out of living in a country and learning a language that differed so dramatically from my own. He turned out to be more right than he probably realized: the experience of living with a Japanese family—and then choosing to major in Asian studies as well as English literature—sparked a lifelong fascination with what happens when vastly different cultures meet, meld, and/or clash—whether that be in the arts

(as I explored in *The Painter from Shanghai*) or in battle, as I contemplate in *Gods*.

What started this book? A scene, a character, a turn of phrase?

It actually started with my husband Michael (as, somewhat embarrassingly, did my first novel!). A documentary filmmaker, he's been working in past years on a film about the 2006 civilian massacre in the Iraqi village of Haditha. One of his interviewees brought up the Tokyo firebombing as an example of something that by today's standards is generally considered a war crime, though its legality was far murkier at the time.

That comment made me realize how little I really knew about the bombing, even though I'd studied Japanese history in college and graduate school and had lived in Japan for five years. I started researching the event and found myself stunned. Not just by the attack's scope (100,000 civilians killed in just a few hours; a full quarter of the city incinerated) but by what felt like an almost deafening silence about it in the years since—particularly compared to the ongoing discussions about Dresden, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. I wanted my novel to explore that vacuum—and perhaps even try to fill it somewhat.

What sort of research did you do for it?

I read pretty much every book about the Pacific War, prewar and war-era Japan, and American bombers that I could get my hands on, a few of them even in Japanese (though I quickly gave up on that—I'm very rusty!). And I took some really worthwhile research trips, traveling to Tokyo to speak with historians and former soldiers there, visiting the Showa Museum and the War Damages Archives, and interviewing some extraordinary women who had survived the firebombing firsthand. In 2011 I also visited Ohio for the annual reunion of surviving Doolittle Raiders—which was truly inspiring—and toured the American Air Power Museum in Farmingdale, New York, where they were kind enough to let me climb around in an actual B-25. I came very close to taking a ride in a B-25 as well, but when the pilot called to tell me one of the 67-year-old parts was failing and had to be replaced before we went up, I kind of chickened out (!)

How closely did you hew to historical realism?

As you know, it's always a delicate balancing act between your story and history when you are writing historical fiction. My approach in both my novels has been to hew as closely to the facts as is possible in the broader historical context—working with maps, timelines, and historical detail to ensure I get the overarching elements right. When working on narrative and characters, however, my main interest becomes making sure I hew to their stories, since that, after all, is what makes for good fiction. That's when I may tweak or merge or outright fabricate details for the sake of narrative truth. For instance, two of the voices in *The Gods of Heavenly Punishment* are those of Cam and Lacy Richards, a Doolittle Raider and his wife whom I created from bits and pieces of existing stories about the real Raiders and real women in America's home front. Creating a fictional pastiche in that way gives me the literary and emotional freedom to craft a story that works within my novel's context.

It is such an intricately woven plot. Did you have the whole structure in mind before you started writing, or was it more a voyage of discovery?

Voyage of discovery, for sure! To be honest, when I started out in 2008 I had only one character in mind. That was Yoshi, the girl at the novel's heart, who I knew I wanted to place squarely in the middle of the firebombing and yet also somehow connect to Japan's colonies in northern China. But as I continued my research, other characters sort of called out to me. I became intrigued by the Doolittle Raids as the precursor of the firebombings, and Cam Richards helped me tell the story. Hana Kobayashi is based on a Japanese woman I read about who was schooled in England during Japan's internationalization "boom" and brought back to Tokyo at the height of its xenophobia.

Anton Reynolds is based on real-life American architect Antonin Raymond, whom I learned about while researching the military's initial firebombing exercises in Utah. He had built many of Tokyo's modern buildings during the 1920s and '30's, but during the war he helped the government by building the Japanese-style tenement houses that the air force then used to perfect their incendiary weaponry. Billy Reynolds is based on a more vague idea I had of an American soldier who meets Yoshi during the Occupation and somehow becomes her salvation.

In each of these characters I felt like I'd found a unique window on the Pacific conflict and its aftermath. But in the beginning, at least, I had no idea how to put them together—that part took the brainstorming. How do I connect Yoshi to northern China? Well, what if her father is a carpenter who helps to build Japan's frontier outposts there? How do I fit in this weird Anglo-Japanese character? Well, maybe she's Yoshi's mother . . . which means she'd have to be married to the carpenter. Where does an American architect who destroys his own buildings fit in to all this? And how do I get at the conflict and betrayal he must have felt? Well, he's an architect—so he'd have to have builders, right? What if Yoshi's father is his builder—and Anton falls for her beautiful Westernized mother? That's how it all came together in the end—it was like weaving a giant literary web.

Did you have a favorite character in this book? I, of course, loved Yoshi, but I felt so much sympathy for her mother, Hana, whose life was ruined before she even got a chance to live it.

Hana was probably the most intriguing character for me as well. Which is interesting, since her voice is so much more limited than those of the other characters, and so we mainly see her through other people's eyes. In many ways, though, that was what helped in keeping her intriguing and mysterious—even for me. It also felt like an appropriately respectful approach. She is easily the most tortured soul in the novel. But in the end, her motivations, conflicts, and sorrows remain mostly private and her own.

Somewhat unexpectedly, though, I think that the Anton Reynolds character was my favorite one to write. Though I didn't really plan it this way, his character ended up with a rather dry, self-important perspective on life—and yet in my narrative he kept on finding himself in situations where he had little or no control. Having him try to rationalize and explain his way out of various (and often amorous) predicaments provided some much-needed comic relief in what was otherwise a very intense, and often very dark, story for me.

Where is your next book set? And any other details you can share?

I've been around the world and back in my head trying to figure that one out—from the American Midwest to New York City to Berlin. Likewise with the time period—I've thought '50s, '60s, '70s. . . . In the end, though, I think I may go back to Asia one last time. I don't want to label myself as a predominantly Asia-oriented writer (though it did work for Pearl Buck). But there's something about the region and the period that continues to fascinate me—all the political and cultural turmoil, the rich conflict, the identity-seeking.... I don't think I'm quite through with it yet!

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