



# Bride of the Rat God

*Barbara Hambly*

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## **Bride of the Rat God** Barbara Hambly

Chrysanda Flamande was the sultriest vamp of the silver screen in Hollywood, California, in the year 1923. Then an elderly Chinese gentleman warned her that a trinket she'd worn in her last movie had marked her to be the bride of an ancient devil-god of Manchuria. Now the Rat God is stalking closer, and Chrysanda is discovering that there's no mousetrap big enough to keep her from being dragged unwilling to the altar!

## **Bride of the Rat God Details**

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## From Reader Review *Bride of the Rat God* for online ebook

### Marsha says

I've always loved history especially since I grew up in Los Angeles, California, an area filled with it. So, when I read the summary for "*Bride of the Rat God*" and discovered that the setting was the early silent movie age in Hollywood, I was fascinated. Additionally, the book has a paranormal twist centering on Chinese mythology; so, what's not to love, right? Well, the problem is in the writing I'm afraid. Sometimes, the best approach when attempting to tell a story is the direct one. This book had such massive potential but it all was lost in the vagueness and flourishes of the writing.

Chrysanda (Christine) Flamande is a rising star in the silent films of the 1920's. She is also kindhearted by taking in Norah, the British widow of her brother killed in the First World War. Norah serves as the dog walker and assistant for Chris. Like most starlets of the time, Chris is having an affair with Frank Brown, mogul of the production company. Frank is well aware of Christine's love of anything Chinese and gifts her with a necklace reported to have been stolen from The Forbidden City. Chris loves this gift and wears it in her films and at gala events. Little does she know that this necklace will be the cause her to be the unwilling bride to a demon of Manchuria.

While Christine is filming her new movie, "*She Devil of Babylon*" gentle, plain, Norah is slowly getting to know the cameraman, Alec Mindelbaum and discovering disturbing information about murders and Chinese/Manchurian myths. Along with the three Pekinese watchdogs, will she be able to stay alive and keep her sister-in-law safe as well? You will have to read the book to discover the answers to these questions. Quite frankly, this is the best part!

Although I enjoyed the characters including the self-centered drug using Hollywood actors; the book was somewhat of a tedious read for me. Unfortunately, I believe this book will only appeal to a specific audience, one that has the background knowledge for the references the author throws out, but does not always explain. For example, 'VADS' is mentioned; but nowhere is the acronym explained. I went on the internet to discover that it stands for the 1909 Voluntary Aid Detachment unit consisting of women who helped out during the war. Fatty is mentioned (referring to Fatty Arbuckle) but no real background knowledge is provided. It just so happens that I am slightly aware of the comedian's scandal and trial after the death of a starlet. However, it was truly before my time. There are many other references, names and acronyms referred to without providing the reader with any information and I found it frustrating. I am still trying to figure out who 'that poor boy trapped in the rose-pink walls of Peking' is; although, I suspect that it refers to the child emperor of China. In the end, I enjoyed the premise of the book better than its' execution.

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### victoria.p says

I enjoyed this a lot.

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## **Jamie Collins says**

A nice urban fantasy novel set in Los Angeles in 1923, during the height of the silent film era, hence the hilarious title and movie poster cover. The story takes place during the filming of *The She-Devil of Babylon*, which is plagued by mishaps because the film's lovely star is being hunted by an ancient Chinese demon.

The blurb is misleading, because our protagonist is not the glamorous, good-natured "Chrysanda", who calls everyone *Darling* and lives on alcohol and cocaine, but rather her dowdy sister-in-law Norah, a WWI widow who left a miserable job in England to become the movie star's assistant.

The fantasy bits are less satisfying than watching the actors, the crew, the stuntmen and the producers as they wrestle with makeup, lights and cameras; ply each other with alcohol, drugs and sex; and manipulate the press and the police.

Hambly's writing is always good, even if her action scenes are a bit preposterous. I enjoyed the setting very much. There's a nicely subdued romance and a good bit of humor. I'm not a fan of Pekingese dogs, but I became fond of the pack of little Lion Dogs which are featured here.

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## **Hirondelle says**

This is fun, a 1920s Hollywood set fantasy novels, with a bookish heroine, demon fighting pekingese dogs. Not a great book, but a lot of fun and the setting and details had a lot of charm.

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## **Yvonne says**

When I finished reading *Bride of the Rat God* the first time, I reopened it at the beginning and started reading it again. Yes, I loved it that much.

The blurb makes me think that Hambly's publisher really didn't quite know how to market this book, but then again, one of the things I like about Hambly's characters is that they are very much themselves and not easily reducible to blurbs. The main viewpoint character is not Chrysandre Flamande, star of the silent screen, but her widowed sister-in-law Norah Blackstone. Norah is a practical and quietly wry bluestocking from a proper Edwardian family in London; Chris has brought her to Los Angeles partly to take care of Chang Ming, Buttercreme, and Black Jasmine, her new Pekingese dogs, and partly because Norah has been swamped by her losses and Chris is kinder than she appears. One of the nicest things about this book is watching Norah's friendship with Alec Mindlebaum, the cameraman for Chris's movies, progress. Chris's stuntman from her last movie dies under strange circumstances that Norah, Chris, and Alec slowly realize have to do with Chris's necklace and its ties to the Rat God.

I liked so many things about this book: the picture of 1920s Los Angeles and the early years of moviemaking, Norah's sense of humor as gently applied to same, the way Norah and Chris take care of each other, the way Alec and Norah interact. Oh, and the dogs! The dogs are wonderful and important, and you could not possibly mistake one of them for either of the others, because they are such distinct characters in their own right.

**???? ??????? says**

[illegible]

### Megan says

Down-to-earth widow Norah works as the chaperone to her glamorous, silent film star sister-in-law. Mostly this entails looking after Christine's trio of Pokes and ensuring Christine arrives places on time, but when Christine's stunt double is the victim of a violent murder on a night when Norah experiences some creepy horror herself, surreal Hollywood gets even stranger.

The 1923 Hollywood setting had me swooning; I pretty much ate up every detail about film-making, about the brutal lifestyle, about the power struggles, about the personalities. The characters, even the minor ones, were vibrant presences, easy to remember who was who without needless caricatures.

The tone/genre of the book enthralled me as well. The horror is slowly, elegantly revealed; not just the supernatural horror driving the book's plot, but the very human horror in Norah's backstory, and the very human horrors of doubts and insecurities that keep Christine up at night. It's a mixture of subtlety and over-the-top craziness that really worked for me.

I wasn't really wild about the MYSTERIOUS EXOTIC CHINESE MYSTERY RAT GOD angle. There was depth depicted to Chinese-American culture, and there was narrative acknowledgement of whites appropriating and misinterpreting that culture in awful ways, and acknowledgement of whites treating Chinese-Americans awfully, and the white protagonists of the book all treated the prominent Chinese characters as people. Which was ALL GOOD. But I wasn't completely at ease with the mythology being used and exoticized, even if the narrative was generally lucid and thoughtful about what it was doing.

Also, for fellow dog lovers, the dogs in this book are awesome and awesome characters with dog personalities and come out safe at the book's ending.

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## Andrea says

Such a thoroughly enjoyable book.

The story follows Norah, a World War I widow, who has been rescued from drudgery to become an assistant to her dead husband's movie star sister, Christine. Her main job is to look after Christine's three Pekingese - all part of the star's fashionable interest in everything Chinese.

Unfortunately, this interest has included an ancient necklace with more than a few problematic conditions attached, and we follow Norah, Christine, and Norah's new friend Alec through shooting schedules, strangely gnawed foundations, murders, traps, attempted murders and desperate searches for solutions.

A book like this could fall into the crass and problematic, wandering dangerously toward cultural appropriation and exotification, but Hambly manages to avoid that, in my opinion, by taking Christine's period-true cultural appropriation and exotification and showing her how shallow an understanding of Chinese culture she has.

Christine is another strong point of the story. She is an unabashed hedonist who at first glance might seem to only have her beauty going for her. But she is kind, loyal, cynical about people and her position in the movie world and says things like: "You can only keep going so long on things like dope, and gin, and stuntmen with pretty eyelashes."

I hope she gets her naked dancing boys, eventually.

The romance in the book is one of the styles I appreciate: two people meeting, spending time with each other, and developing a slow, unhurried appreciation of each other.

The narrator of the audiobook was very good, though her Hungarian accent was terrible, and she was only marginal on the accents of the two main Chinese characters.

Oh, and the Pokes were fabulous.

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## Jeffrey says

I'm re-reading this again for the fun of it...

1. I love this book because of the horrible title
2. I love it because of the awful Rat-God cover
3. I love it because its actually about Chinese Mythology (made-up or real, doesn't matter)
4. I love it because it takes place in the midst of early silent movie making
5. I love it because it has interesting characters with interesting backgrounds
6. I love it because it moves fast.

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## **Veronika Elde says**

wow! the cover (which I'd totally judged it by) did not lend expectations to how amazing the writing was! the plot was engaging, the characters interesting the imagery vivid. I don't think the back of the book is a true statement of the actual story, but maybe something of a previous rough draft. the end has explanatory blurbs explaining the authoress' head-canons, which I love. the sense of the supernatural in the mundane world is superb. love it!!

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## **Erin (PT) says**

This is an ebook reread of an old favorite, one I've read many times and will probably read many more. Appropriately enough for a novel about movies, there's something very cinematic about *Bride of the Rat God*--more so than the rest of Hambly's novels--and it captures well the spirit of the era as well as the somewhat innocent, sweetly charming banter and romance one thinks of when you think of "classic" cinema. I also think it's one of Hambly's funniest books, down to the hijinks of the Pekingese stealing scenes from their human counterparts. With most of Hambly's books, I think they're my favorite in the moment--and I have yet to see her put out a book that I didn't like--but if asked, I feel fairly certain that *Bride of the Rat God* is my true favorite and always a delight.

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## **Carol. says**

I thought it very well done for its type, and would highly recommend it for fans of romantic mystery, fans of the 1920s studio scene, and those who like Pekingese dogs. I won't bore you by meandering on about L.A., where I lived for four years, but I will refer you to a full, uncensored and off-topic review at:

<http://clsiewert.wordpress.com/2014/0...>

and

<http://carols.booklikes.com/post/7669...>

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## **Tracey says**

I love this book. It should be an idiotic story, and I'd love to know if the title was Ms. Hambly's idea or her publisher's: it certainly does sound like a movie title, and one the starlet who is also the title character would star in, but it also makes the book sound like a B Movie, and the cover art ... And it's anything but B.

Christine, aka Chrysanda Flamande, is the sister-in-law of Norah, whose point of view dominates. Christine married her brother a while ago, and then after his death – and those of the rest of Norah's family – rescued

her from misery with an aunt in Britain to whisk her off to Hollywood. I suppose that outrageous as Hollywood is now, it had to be even more stunning in 1927, when this takes place. Christine is a very practical, very lovely gold-digger; she has a history of marrying wealthy older men, and is currently the paramour of her producer. She's not a very good actress, but she's a completely pragmatic about her lifestyle, and she's a good person, a good friend to Norah despite driving her mad, and beloved of her three Pekingese.

Those three Pekingese are characters I will remember long after I've forgotten all about *Face of the World*: Black Jasmine, Buttercream, and Changums – Chang Ming. Often a book that features animals anthropomorphosizes them annoyingly, or leaves the reader covered with goo, or otherwise is less than it should be. This made me want a Peke. They were characters in their own right, without being little humans in fur jackets – not like some of the cat-fancier murder mysteries I've read. They were gorgeously made real, from their rolling gait to their individual personalities. It was a joy.

And the people were pretty wonderful too. Barbara Hambly excels at (among many other things) making minor characters very nearly as well-limned as the major ones, without cluttering up the story. It reminds me of – iirc – Joss Whedon's advice to Adam Baldwin on playing Jayne: he thinks he's the hero of the whole gorram story. Many of the bit players on Ms. Hambly's stage give that impression: they're living their own stories, which just so happen to intersect with the one you're reading. And I loved the major characters. Norah is a damaged, hurting girl who finds in Hollywood and her sister-in-law's home the curious blend of cynicism and wonder that is so uniquely Hollywood... And she finds Alec, one of the studio's cameramen, who quietly makes himself indispensable.

And the writing. There is, sadly, not nearly enough writing at this level in the world. This could have been a throwaway novel, a light and fluffy nothing. It could have been simply dreadful. Instead it hit all kinds of chords, presented real characters and real menace to them, and for the love of heaven she referenced the Laocoön in a metaphor. Who *\*does\** that?

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## **Kelley Ceccato says**

I know Barbara Hambly gets a lot of grief from some quarters for her *Star Wars Expanded Universe* novels (which it's doubtful I'll read), but my experience with her places her in the front ranks of my favorite fantasy writers. Her prose is vivid, insightful, and empathetic, and while I may take my time with a Hambly novel, I've always found that time to be well spent. Every time I start to doubt her, she proves that doubt to have been foolish indeed.

Take, for instance, the character of Shang Ko, the Shining Crane. When he first showed up, I suspected him of being a "yellow devil" villain along the lines of the malevolent illusionist Chang in the 1978 *Doctor Who* episode "The Talons of Weng-Chiang." Yet bit by bit, scene by scene, Hambly broke this assessment down, so that by the end of the novel he has emerged as the big d\*mn hero whose customs and beliefs are depicted with understanding and sympathy. A part of me suspects this is Hambly's very intention -- to show us the character in a suspicious "Orientalist" light, only to break that image apart piece by piece. Well done, Ms. Hambly. Forgive me for doubting.

In addition to the strong and involving prose, the other aspects I loved about Hambly's writing in *The Ladies of Mandrigyn* et. seq. and *Stranger at the Wedding* are in evidence here: active and complex female characters, and strong emotional bonds between said characters (with one protecting the other). Some readers



might be disappointed that Norah, not the charismatic and devil-may-care Christine, is the book's protagonist (the cover is completely misleading on that point), but the story would only really work with an outsider, a "Dorothy in Oz" as Norah herself often thinks, as the point-of-view figure. Norah may not be as flashy as Christine, but Hambly develops her strength through quiet, careful strokes. I love that she becomes a Hollywood screenwriter at the end. Christine herself proves tougher and less shallow than she first appears, as she remains loyal to Shang when nearly everyone around her is urging her to think the worst of him. These two are the book's big draws for me, but the 1920s Hollywood setting is another, since classic cinema from the silent era through the fifties has always fascinated and delighted me. This world is painted in deft detail, with Hambly's fictional characters mingling, when appropriate, with real-life personalities of the time. (Love the bit when Alec, the fictional cameraman, is introduced to Billy Bitzer, cameraman for D.W. Griffith.)

And then there are the dogs. Those adorable dogs. If you're a dog person, particularly a little-dog person, this book is for you.

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## Tracey says

It's not fair. It's not fair to other writers I'll read after this book – Barbara Hambly is going to make most of them look bad, and I feel sorry for them. It's also not fair to me as the reader to set the bar this high, so that I am perpetually a little dissatisfied with almost everything else. We won't even get into what she does to my own writing and opinion thereof.

This is the first time I'm writing a second review of a book. I reread BofRG for pure pleasure over two years ago, and wrote a brief paean to it on my blog. I remembered a great deal for this reread, but it didn't impair my pure pleasure. The only thing that did that was a less-than-perfect Kindle edition, in which a couple of "th"s transmuted into "m"s and line breaks and skipped lines were erratic. (Conversations often took place in one paragraph without correct breaks to indicate new speakers.) And that's not enough to make me think about knocking off a star. (I'm getting used to cranky editions, sadly.) (One odd thing: the book description says "This ebook features an illustrated biography of Barbara Hambly, including rare photos and never-before-seen documents from the author's personal collection." Not my copy...)

The book: Some few months ago, the great American silent film actress Chrysanda Flamande swooped in and rescued her brother's British widow Norah from a life of silent desperation. This was partly an action of generosity – Norah was in a genuinely bad place – but also an act born of self-centeredness: Chrysanda, known to everyone who *knows* her as Christine, wanted to buy some Pekingese and the breeder wasn't comfortable with her breezy plans for their care, and Norah would suit admirably as dog wrangler. "Everything Christine did was fifty percent show, but the other fifty percent, Norah reflected, was pure gold."

Change the percentages and the same could be applied to the book: maybe 2% pure show, in the presentation through the mad B-movie title and original paperback cover art, and the rest pure gold. (I don't much like the new cover; the necklace is utterly wrong. Opals, people – though the Open Road insignia does fit into the image rather neatly, whether it was intentional or not.) I said in my original review that this might well be my favorite book by Barbara Hambly – which is saying something – and I stand by that.

The evil is well-drawn – too well, perhaps, for peace of mind. It's what Barbara Hambly does best, that unique brand of *dear-God-what-was-that-noise* menace escalating to *there's-no-way-we're-surviving-this*

danger. The malevolence her heroes strive against is big, and canny, and powerful – so powerful. And inescapable.

Characterization is extraordinary. What Barbara Hambly does best is the slightly gawky, socially awkward, quietly intelligent character. Here it's Norah, who is bemused by the Oz she has been lofted into by her whirlwind sister-in-law, and is thrown into a roil of emotions by unexpected love in the midst of even more unexpected Gothic danger. The pain of her past is heartbreakingly real, and even more heartbreaking when it is dragged into the present. That aforementioned whirlwind, Christine, could very easily (in other hands) have been a cliché of superficiality, all hair and makeup and frou-frou, a steel lily of a gold-digger. She shouldn't be a sympathetic character. But she is, deeply – she inspires devotion in her dogs and a string of men and millions of adoring fans, and in her sister-in-law, and in an elderly Chinese man trying to help her, and, in the end, in the reader. She's terrific. Charlie Sandringham doesn't have a huge role, but it is a very, very effective one, three-dimensional and believable. In fact, all of the "bit players" are very, very effective – I think I wrote the first time I blathered about this book that Barbara Hambly takes to heart what Joss Whedon said about Jayne, and in fact all characters: he is the hero of his own story. Any one of the characters mentioned in the pages of a book by Barbara Hambly could, had she the time and inclination, be expanded into his or her own adventure. (There's a fan-fic challenge...) Shang Ko is a worthy member of the guild of elderly wizards in Ms. Hambly's work, could certainly support several volumes on his life story alone. Alex is ... Alex could well be the man of my dreams, but I think I've probably thought that about half of Ms. Hambly's male characters. When Norah asks him "What did he offer you?" the question goes unanswered, and the evasion hurts because his pain is obvious.

These are the people who need to win the fight, who almost don't realize there is a fight simply because they're realistically so busy with their lives, and Ms. Hambly always sets it up so that the reader wants to find a sword or spellbook or baseball bat and help them win – the sort of feeling you find in great young adult fiction, in a book for grown-ups. (The only reason I think I'd hesitate to say this was suitable for young adults would be the depth of evil in the Rat God, creepy as hell ... but then again I have this fuddy-duddy feeling that teenagers these days are reading things that would have had me sleeping with six teddy bears and all the lights on, AND the dog.)

Oh, the dogs. I talked about them in my original review, but I have to do it again. Chang Ming, Buttercreme, and Black Jasmine, Christine's three Pekingese, are stronger characters without saying a single word than perhaps four-fifths of all the other characters in fiction. (Not a random number, that; I'm serious.) Ms. Hambly knows dogs, and she knows *these* dogs – Pekingese are different, and she knows, intimately, just how. She knows how walking more than one dog invariably means crossed leashes, and the politics of the supper dish. She knows how to show a very distinct personality for each dog without in any way anthropomorphizing them. (Deifying, maybe a little, but that's in keeping.) I never wanted a Peke until I read this book. Now I want one – and I want to adopt one with only one eye.

*As far as Norah knew, Chang Ming would no more have tried to bite her than he'd have stolen a car.*

What Barbara Hambly does best is description. The dogs are as unique as they are in part because she worked in wonderful word-pictures of them throughout the book. "That peculiarly businesslike Pekingese toddle, fur flouncing, as if to say *Places to go. Things to do.*" I've seen Pekes in dog shows – that is perfect phrasing. I will remember the image of Alex's curly red hair and beard and glasses and humor, Christine's tousled black-haired gorgeousness and steel lily strength, Norah's height and wryness and brown-sugar hair long after I've forgotten most books' characters. Her mention of the Chinese gentleman's "bartered blue coat" uses a lovely economy of words to say everything necessary about that coat, and a good bit about the gentleman.

And her settings are superb, from the mundane:

Alex Mindelbaum removed his glasses and polished them with a paper napkin from the cheap tin holder at one end of the much-stained and cigarette-burned pine table.

(I don't know why that seems so perfect to me) ... to the sublimely ridiculous:

The house Frank Brown had bought for Christine was in the Spanish style, backed against the sharp rise of the hill and climbing up it, a minor fairy tale of pink-washed turrets, pocket-handkerchief terraces, and balconies no broader than a lace table runner. Among its Mediterranean arches and heavy, darkly carved beams the furniture looked wildly incongruous, a combination of modernist enameled sinuosity - purchased by Frank Brown - and a gaudy clutter of Chinese lamps, vases, lacquered Oriental cabinets that lent primitive splashes of cinnabar, gold, and blue to the smooth scheme of black and cream silk.

The setting is always sensual and alive and memorable. This is a glorious evocation of 1927 Hollywood, and it makes me want to go rent a Valentino movie. (What I really want to see is the movie they're making in the book: *Kiss of Darkness*, heaven help me.) The glamour of a Chrysanda Flamande shoot, with a slapstick comedy filming on the other side of a thin partition; Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford visible along the edges like constellations (not just stars personified) (and I want to thank Ms. Hambly for mentioning the Fatty Arbuckle scandal without an "As you know, Jane" moment); the scrub and coyotes surrounding new construction, and the sites used almost exclusively by film crews – it all adds up to a milieu as alien and yet clearly envisaged as Darwath.

Of course, what Barbara Hambly does best is vivid metaphor and simile. Only Robin McKinley holds a candle to her in my experience.

... "The music had ceased. Alex walked over to the gramophone, wound it up again, and put on more blues, a woman singing this time, gay and sad at once, like a stranded angel who had traded holiness for humanity but remembered what it used to be like to know God." (I want to know who she was thinking of when she wrote that. And then I want to go straight to iTunes.)

... "a rolling fur ball like three wigs fighting, rufous, ivory, and black"...

... "a feathered slipper lay like a killed bird in the middle of the floor"...

... "the Laocöon of sequins and tweed" ...

(I cited that one in the original review as well, because – come on. The Laocöon. Seriously. Who does that?)

What Barbara Hambly does best is, simply, writing. The changes in how Christine's co-star Blake Fallon are described are extremely significant yet subtle, extremely creepy when you know what's going on. The vital element of the necklace is introduced on the very first page, and carefully, masterfully inserted into the narrative flow so that the reader is aware of it without necessarily even realizing it; it is tied in with the Pokes and even the incongruous house, and overall builds a solid foundation for a wild story. Back story and explanation is worked through the narrative seamlessly – everything the reader needs is there, when it's needed, apparently (though certainly not literally) effortlessly.

The wilder elements of the story – scoffed at by minor characters overhearing the story – become part of the

fight: Shang Ko knows his race and that story are against him, but he has to try anyway and do what he can despite the others' disbelief. Everything in his past has led up to this fight, and he has no choice – and neither does Christine. And because she loves Christine, neither does Nora. And because he loves Nora, neither does Alex. In the end, this becomes a story about courage and pain – beyond the sheer bravery needed to fight the evil, there is Shang Ko's dogged indefatigability despite the damage he has suffered; the dogs' failure to recognize that they are more bite-sized than lion-sized; Norah's brittle courage in simply putting one foot in front of the other, and then in allowing herself to think about a future; Alex's patient silence about a painful past and willingness to let others remain silent about their own; the fragile, flamboyant shell over Christine's fundamental loneliness. It's a story about what love can do – not the way that usually comes off, the common run of twoo-wuv drivel, but all the varieties of love, which really does vincit omnia. And that really is what Barbara Hambly does best.

I do love this book.

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