



Days of the Dead

Barbara Hambly

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The *New York Times* hails Barbara Hambly's novels featuring Benjamin January as "masterly," "ravishing," and "haunting." The *Chicago Tribune* crowns them "dazzling...January is a wonderfully rich and complex character." Now the bestselling author returns with a story that leads January from the dangerously sensual milieu of New Orleans into a world seething with superstition and dark spirits, where one man's freedom turns on a case of murder and blood vengeance.

Days of the Dead

Mexico City in the autumn of 1835 is a lawless place, teeming with bandits and beggars. But an urgent letter from a desperate friend draws Benjamin January and his new bride Rose from New Orleans to this newly free province. Here they pray they'll find Hannibal Sefton alive--and not hanging from the end of a rope. Sefton stands accused of murdering the only son of prominent landowner Don Prospero de Castellon. But when Benjamin and Rose arrive at Hacienda Mictlán, they encounter a murky tangle of family relations, and more than one suspect in young Fernando's murder.

While the evidence against Hannibal is damning, Benjamin is certain that his consumptive, peace-loving fellow musician isn't capable of murder. Their only allies are the dead boy's half sister, who happens to be Hannibal's latest innamorata, and the mentally unstable Castellon himself, who awaits Mexico's holy Days of the Dead, when he believes his slain son will himself reveal the identity of his killer. The search for the truth will lead Benjamin and Rose down a path that winds from the mazes of the capital's back streets and barrios to the legendary pyramids of Mictlán and, finally, to a place where spirits walk and the dead cry out for justice. But before they can lay to rest the ghosts of the past, Benjamin and Rose will have to stop a flesh-and-blood murderer who's determined to escape the day of reckoning and add Benjamin and Rose to the swelling ranks of the dead.

From the Hardcover edition.

Days of the Dead Details

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From Reader Review Days of the Dead for online ebook

Ali says

I look forward to Benjamin January mysteries and read about one a year - but this one didn't do it for me. I was bored, never did fully understand the tangled mess of relationships and dozens of characters and who was allied with who and who wanted what, and found the mystery itself contrived, and the writing occasionally unnecessarily foreshadowing events that did not need to be foreshadowed so aggressively to make me keep reading.

From the reviews on goodreads, it looks like the next one is set back in New Orleans, so I sincerely hope that one is better. A rare disappointment in this series.

Susan says

An historical novel of suspense, Days of the Dead is rich with detail of life in Mexico City and its outlying haciendas during the tumultuous days of 1835 with Santa Anna as both President and General of its army ready to march on Texas for what will become the Battle of the Alamo. This novel is 6th in a series featuring an intriguing character, Benjamin January. I have already ordered the first in this series so I can fill in the background of this well-written man and most likely will follow through the rest of the series in order. As to the suspense in this particular story, it proceeds at a stately pace. Hambly leads the reader through the fact-finding and intuitive thought processes of January (and his new wife) with the assurance of a seasoned writer.

Heather D-G says

This is the seventh Benjamin January mystery, and follows the excellent *Wet Grave*. This entry follows the adventures of free-man-of-color Benjamin January as he and his new wife, Rose, travel to Mexico in an attempt to rescue their old friend Hannibal, who has been accused of murder. In the course of the book, we learn a lot about Mexico of the 1830's and the cultural clashes within. It's a period rich in drama and the author mines it beautifully to provide a dense backdrop to the smaller story she relates.

I will say that the pacing had issues. Sometimes the historical details threatened to overwhelm the plot. In tone, this felt more like *Die Upon a Kiss*, and as such I would not recommend it as a starting point for this series. Of course, you wouldn't want to begin a series anywhere except at the beginning anyway, right? Right? Readers who are already fans of Ben, Rose, and Hannibal will be happy to see their old friends again and more patient with a sometimes meandering story-line. I'm looking forward to picking up the next in the series soon! (I purchase Kindle editions.)

Jamie Collins says

2.5 stars. It was nice to spend time with Benjamin, Rose and Hannibal again, and this novel was as well

written as all of Hambly's work, but this isn't one of my favorites in this series. After the events of the previous book I was eager to see how their lives in New Orleans would change, but instead this book takes place in Mexico, where Hannibal has been living with his opera singer.

It's 1835, and we get to meet Santa Anna and hear all about the Texas Revolution. Meanwhile Hannibal has been accused of murdering the unpopular son of a delusional wealthy landowner, and Benjamin and Rose are trying to clear his name. The murder mystery itself is a pretty neat puzzle, but there are about a thousand Mexican characters and I never could keep them all straight, so it was hard to become emotionally invested in the story.

Benjamin is disappointed that blacks are not treated much better in Mexico, even though that country has abolished slavery. And while he's not in danger of being captured and sold into slavery, the constant danger of attack from bandits more than cancels out this benefit. He and Rose really should move to Paris immediately, instead of going back to New Orleans, but I suppose there wouldn't be any more novels if they did so.

Unwisely says

After the last book, I was skeptical this series could go anywhere...but this book was a *very* pleasant surprise. Or, as I texted a friend, "It's set in Mexico and they brought back my favorite character! Squee!!!"

Hannibal is back, and in trouble. Locked room mystery, all evidence points to Hannibal, only Ben can get him out. He brings along Rose, because why not? There's also a mad patrón, excessive religiosity, buckets of family drama, and Santa Anna, presumably because she could. Which made it was almost reminiscent of the Flashman books. (This guy's.)

Anyway, it was fun, historical, and did I mention that Hannibal's back??? Eeee!! She is once again dropping hints about his background; hopefully that will someday be explored. (I just checked and there are two more to look forward to, yay.)

Ashley W says

Set in the 1830s in Mexico, Benjamin's friend is accused of a murder he didn't commit, so January and his wife Rose, come to Mexico from New Orleans to save him and find the true murderer before the end of the Days of the Dead.

Usually when I read mysteries, I guess the murderer after about the first page, and then I get bored, but I loved this one. It was thrilling, informative, and the main character, a free black man named Benjamin January, was pretty darn awesome. It was hard to guess "Whodunnit" and I was surprised to see who the real culprit was at the end. The book also dealt with the beginnings of the Mexican-American war led by Santa Anna and the tensions between Americans and Mexicans were very thick. I also saw a lot of racial problems that also went on during the time period in Mexico, who also didn't see African Americans as anything but servants or slaves.

I wasn't aware that the book was a series until I finished it, so I absolutely have to get the first book and see

how Benjamin January started out!

Bonnie says

I hadn't read any books from this series for some time and was pleased to see it available on ebook from the library. Unlike previous books in this series, this one was set in and around Mexico City, where January and his wife go to help their friend Hannibal Sefton, who has been accused of murder. The mystery of who actually killed the son of a mad Mexican nobleman is involving and has a rather surprising conclusion, but what I especially liked was the historical Mexican background during the 1830s when Santa Anna was about to go to war with Texas. I have visited Mexico quite a few times, but really haven't known much of its history except for its conquest by Spain and something about its ancient inhabitants.

Kara says

And now for something completely different.

Benjamin January leaves all the murder and mayhem of New Orleans to head for Mexico City where his friend Hannibal is accused of poisoning a Mexican aristocrat.

It's an interesting shift of gears for January – there is still danger, yes, and lots of it, with madmen, politicians, bandits, and ill-tempered French cooks lurking around every corner, but January is in the kind of danger that could attack anyone, like an illness, rather than a specific danger out to get him for the past six books, like slave stealers, debt collectors, and murderers.

It's definitely a slower change of pace to see January treated more like Miss Marple by the other characters than hounded as he usually is like LeVar Burton in *Roots*.

It means January isn't constantly diving out of windows to avoid being captured or killed, but it also allows him and the reader time to enjoy the scenery, and, for all its dangers, the landscape, both terrain and cultural, of 1830's Mexico City, is beautiful in its descriptions of the colors, the flowers, the mixing of Catholic Saints and Aztec gods, the theaters, the politics, and the heady mix of Old World and new World cuisine.

The food. Oh, the food. Every time a character has a hot chocolate or a chocolate mole I was practically moaning with envy, knowing this was the REAL stuff they were enjoying – none of this namby pamby watered down waxy Hershey stuff – we're talking actual food of the gods here. Plus tables full of authentic Mexican food, as Mexican as you could possibly get, plus banquet upon banquet served to the stuffy aristos of authentic French cuisine, all of it, from the pans to the sugar to the flour to the cook, imported directly from France.

Sigh.

Bethany says

Generally I absolutely love the Benjamin January mysteries, but unfortunately this one felt more like a chore to read and I found myself reluctant to pick it up and make any progress reading it. I'm not even quite sure why, other than the fact that there are many, many characters to keep track of, along with their back stories and family history, which just made this book confusing. It was interesting to see Ben, Rose, and Hannibal in a new setting and exploring Mexico, but otherwise this one just didn't hold my interest.

dianne says

Whenever i finish a Benjamin January tale i feel like i've consumed so much more than a finely woven, well articulated mystery - i also have so much fun looking up all the stuff i didn't know about the time and place. Have you ever (as i have multiple times) asked yourself, or the world in general - "Why Chihuahuas?" i love dogs - all animals actually, but chihuahuas? They're yappy, nippy, edgy not particularly furry, demanding, too small for protection or warmth... Now we know why sweet harmless dogs genes were twisted, contorted painfully until they produced: chihuahua. They were created to be bumped off.

(pg 154-5) *"They sacrificed dogs, as well you know. Ate them of course, too. Rather than sacrifice a full sized and perfectly edible dog, they bred them specifically for sacrifice, down to the size of rat."*

I also learned about catamites, vinegaroons, and, most importantly, the powerful god Huitzilopochtli, "the left-handed hummingbird, he was the one they had to fear....He needed blood - great quantities of it - if the sun was to rise the next day, and I must say it seems to have worked, because the sun rose on schedule...." Set in Mexico just prior to the kerfuffle that was Santa Anna's war with Texas, we view all strata of society; the corruption and greed of the wealthy and the struggle for survival and meaning in the poor, this story weaves lots of cultural contrast - some with eventual understanding, many not so much. Our protagonist himself is a unique combination of contrasts - a very dark skinned "free man of color" - who thinks he might feel safer in Mexico where "slavery" doesn't exist. But, like the USA circa 200 years later, slavery does exist and perhaps always will; as long as there are such unconscionable, absurd, and shameful standing inequities in power and resources as exist now and did then. Perhaps named something else, but when a few hold all the wealth, the land, the water, the control -the others (the 99%) will always be beholden to their overseers and "mastas". Not a lot of freedom.

So Benjamin sees. Whether he is in Paris (where he trained as a surgeon), New Orleans where he is from, the Northern US (where he can be kidnapped, have his papers stolen and be resold in the south for huge profits, especially in the years after importing more slaves was outlawed in the USA) or here in Mexico - a Black man is always first and foremost a Black man. Few take the moment to learn that he is a world class surgeon, incredibly well read (see: Shakespeare banter) a concert pianist, speaks at least 5 languages that live and a couple (Latin, ancient Greek) that have died, and a deeply spiritual soul.

I know, i know - but how much tobacco can he cut in a day?

I remember as a child thinking how horrible the world WAS in The Past, in the Olden Days - for anyone not male and white. But it really is not any different now - talk to a farmworker in California's central valley, or the little adolescent girls being trafficked on Industrial in Oakland, the day laborer in San Francisco who does not get paid but can do nothing about it because he is undocumented. Likewise Benjamin figures out how the death occurred but isn't able to explain it to the 1835-brained people in charge. Geez, how frustrating..

A thoughtful, sometimes funny, often poignant, always smart book. Highly recommended

Sharon says

I'm working my way through the entire Benjamin January series. So far, I've enjoyed them all. This one is a little bit different, though. It takes place in Mexico, instead of in New Orleans, and deals with the politics of General Santa Anna's government and the events leading up to the Texas wars.

January's friend Hannibal Sefton has been living in Mexico with a woman he met ... and writes a letter talking about how circumstances have changed. To make a long story short, he's being held captive by the woman's family after having been accused of murdering the eldest son. He asks January and his new wife, Rose, to come to Mexico to prove his innocence.

This, of course, is easier said than done. There are rival family factions, a head of household who may or may not be insane ... and religious prejudice all over the place. There were a lot of plot twists, including additional murders ... and events that are staged solely to try to frighten the January couple off the track.

The book is well-researched; there are notes at the end about the culture and facts described in the tale. I'm just looking forward to Rose and Benjamin being back in New Orleans.

Text Addict says

Benjamin and Rose January travel to Mexico to (try to) rescue their friend Hannibal Sefton, who's gotten into a jam. First, he was made an unwilling semi-permanent guest at the hacienda of his paramour's father; then, he's accused of murdering his host's son. The evidence appears damning, but it's also absurd to think that Hannibal would kill anyone.

As always, Hambly richly evokes the historical period and landscape. Mexico in the 1830s was, to put it bluntly, an economic and political mess, and Hambly doesn't mince words about it. In the story, medical issues - and the poor state of medical knowledge in the 1830s - again play a role in the solution of the mystery (e.g., what poison killed the man and how was it administered?). And so do the economic and political problems. Can't say more without giving away too much of the plot, but it's convoluted (so what else is new?) and ranges from Mexico City to the hacienda to nearby Aztec ruins.

Doris says

This book, while extremely well written, didn't have the impact of the other books in the series. I felt it dealt well with Hannibal, who is dying of Tuberculosis (consumption) but the other characters didn't feel as well rounded or as accurate as usual.

A desperate letter from Ben's friend Hannibal leads to a case in Mexico, with Rose pursued by the Don as her beloved Ben works to find the truth behind the murder of the Don's son and heir. This story touches on homosexuality, addiction, and the poverty that is the result of decades of war. I almost felt I was there in one scene where Ben, poor in New Orleans, and in Mexico a man of means, flings coins in the dirt to get the beggars to move away so he and Rose can return to their lodgings.

The author has a grand sense of time and space, and an ability to bring the reader in. And as always, her research is very well done. She shows the arrogance of the white American, lording it over Africans and Indians (Native Americans), and the similar arrogance of the Mexican, the Spaniard, and the Englishman.

Again, a reminder to keep ourselves aware of history so we don't repeat.

Sylvia McIvers says

I love historical fiction, especially by authors who I trust to take time to do the research. In *Days of the Dead*, Barbra Hambly takes her hero, Benjamin January, to Mexico. Is the research as thorough as her stories that took place in the deep south? I haven't read widely enough about Ye Ancient Mexico to know that. However, it is a great read.

Newly rich Benjamin and his wife Rose travel to Mexico to save their friend Hannibal the musician from being hanged for a murder he didn't do. But in a locked-room mystery, who else could have done it? Hannibal says that if he didn't know better, he'd suspect himself. Our Host is a madman, known to be mad for decades, who is protecting Hannibal from the law because he's waiting for his dead son to come back and say who killed him. This does not inspire Hannibal or January with any confidence.

I loved the big reveal at the end, because the tricky method of murder is still with us.

Goose says

I really enjoy the Benjamin January books by Barbara Hambly and I think Benjamin himself is a well rounded and interesting enough character to support this series. However, *Days of the Dead* was one of my least favorite of this series. While Hambly writes with her usual attention to historical detail, there are some problems with this book. Ben, his wife Rose, and friend Hannibal seem a little lost out of Louisiana and plopped down in this plot that takes place in Mexico, where many of the characters come and go with such regularity that the reader is constantly trying to remember who they were and how they are related to the other characters. Fiddler, Hannibal Sefton, plays a bigger part in this plot than he has in the others, and I did get tired of him endlessly quoting great works of literature. Hopefully the next book will find everyone back in New Orleans where they belong, and all of the Dons and Donas of Mexico long forgotten.
