



City of Ink: A Mystery

Elsa Hart

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Following the enthralling 18th century Chinese mysteries *Jade Dragon Mountain* and *White Mirror*, comes the next Li Du adventure in *City of Ink*.

Li Du was prepared to travel anywhere in the world except for one place: home. But to unravel the mystery that surrounds his mentor's execution, that's exactly where he must go.

Plunged into the painful memories and teeming streets of Beijing, Li Du obtains a humble clerkship that offers anonymity and access to the records he needs. He is beginning to make progress when his search for answers buried in the past is interrupted by murder in the present.

The wife of a local factory owner is found dead, along with a man who appears to have been her lover, and the most likely suspect is the husband. But what Li Du's superiors at the North Borough Office are willing to accept as a crime of passion strikes Li Du as something more calculated. As past and present intertwine, Li Du's investigations reveal that many of Beijing's residents — foreign and Chinese, artisan and official, scholar and soldier — have secrets they would kill to protect.

When the threats begin, Li Du must decide how much he is willing to sacrifice to discover the truth in a city bent on concealing it, a city where the stroke of a brush on paper can alter the past, change the future, prolong a life, or end one.

City of Ink: A Mystery Details

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From Reader Review City of Ink: A Mystery for online ebook

Mara says

The first two Li Du mysteries were great for armchair travelers looking for an immersive cultural setting for a mystery, and Elsa Hart certainly doesn't disappoint on that front with City of Ink. From the many descriptions of the hectic activity in Beijing just prior to the Imperial Examinations to quieter scenes like the one in which Li Du takes a tea and dumpling break at a restaurant mid-investigation, Hart consistently creates a believably detailed world for her large cast of characters to inhabit. It's great to read a historical mystery where it's so clear the author did their research!

I will say that plot-wise these books sometimes move a little slowly for me and that I don't feel like Li Du himself is as vividly drawn as some of the supporting characters. Especially in this book as aspects of his painful past are explored, I wished his emotions were a little more accessible to the reader at times. However, overall I feel confident recommending the series to any historical mystery or fiction fan in the mood for something different and for learning about Chinese history and culture along the way. These are perfect rainy afternoon books, especially with a cup of tea nearby!

My thanks to Minotaur Books for sending me a ARC of this book in exchange for my honest review.

HBalikov says

In Elsa Hart's City of Ink, we renew our acquaintance with Li Du, the scholar and former Imperial librarian who, having saved the life of the Emperor, has been allowed back to China's capitol. That was covered in Jade Dragon Mountain. Thanks to the generosity of Net Galley, I now have the opportunity to provide an advanced and honest review of this book.

To be brief: This book is superior to Jade Dragon Mountain and I enjoyed that book very much.
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

In the USA, we ask (in court) for the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Only some of that applies in the China of three hundred years ago, where this story is set. Yet, unlike the adventures of most of the investigators I have read, Li Du pursues the whole truth whether or not the results will hurt or condemn him.

Two things are the ostensible focus of this story:

There is an important examination taking place in a few days. Those few who pass it are guaranteed the start of a successful government career.

"The examination yard was forbidden to candidates. Until the morning the examination began, they could only look at the walls surrounding it. When did they finally enter, they would be locked inside for three days, confined to one of six thousand wooden cells. The cells were roofless, exposed to the scrutiny of guards from watchtowers and examiners from the sheltered comfort of elevated pavilions."

The second focus is a double murder in a factory that could be considered justifiable homicide depending on who committed the crime.

“My advice to you, as your employer and your friend, is to continue writing the report you have been given permission to write. You have shown an aptitude for uncovering truth. Use it, and hope, as I do, that it leads to further revelations. But do not go too far, because if you do, I am not certain I will be able to save you.”

We experience everything along with Li Du and learn more about his background and why he is satisfied now to be the lowly assistant to a minor bureaucrat in a marginal part of Beijing where the government attempts to regulate every citizen's behavior and every neighborhood has its own gates that lock in all citizens each night.

The title of this book, *City of Ink*, has multiple meanings of which you do not want me to spoil your pleasure in discovering. I will only say that up to this current century a government bureaucracy runs on ink. And, we learn that a candidate in his examination can fail for his calligraphy or because his ink isn't sufficient as easily as he can for deficient knowledge.

Some of my GR friends like their mysteries linear and plot-dominated. Some are more like me and will trade some of that impatience of resolving the mystery for some well-crafted descriptions. I am not Chinese; I do not live in the 18th Century; I have never been to China. But the words written by Elsa Hart are so beautiful in their capacity to convey time and place. Here are some that I feel compelled to share.

“All good ink stones are hard enough to grind the ink to a fine consistency, yet smooth enough not to damage your brush, he had said. But it is a rare stone that grinds ink without making a sound. Do you know how it does it? Shu had paused for the anticipation of his listeners to reach its full strength. It does it by convincing the ink stick to be friends with the water, so that they agree to mix without arguing. You don't want an argument on your desk when you are trying to compose a poem! And Shu had chuckled to himself at the image of the embattled writing materials.”

“Chaoyang Gate was routinely crowded with merchants and tax officials coming and going from Tongzhou, the northern shipping terminus of the Grand Canal. This afternoon was no exception. Mules waited passively as laden baskets were adjusted on their backs, their sides twitching in response to biting flies. Horses stood proudly beside armed Bannermen radiating confidence in their sturdy travel attire. Vendors with streaks of charcoal on their cheeks stoked fires while customers shouted orders. The muddy ground was sprinkled with spilled grain and imprinted by boots, hooves, and cart wheels. Barrels and boxes teetered in crooked stacks, through which inspectors slowly circulated, paper and stylus in hand, making notes and issuing receipts. As the sun sank and the hour of the dog approached, guards prepared to close the gates and set the watch.”

“In a city that preferred its citizens to have officially sanctioned reasons to be wherever they were, there were limited places to linger while waiting to meet a friend. Parks were, for the most part, accessible only by imperial invitation. Libraries were privately owned. There were no public squares.”

“Beneath them, carefully folded, were two robes. The first was of blue silk, a rich, deep blue that slid through his fingers like a piece cut from the night sky. The second was an undercoat with a wide, embroidered hem depicting two dragons stretching their claws toward a pearl suspended between them. Beneath the robes were a pair of black silk boots with white soles, and a hat of black and red, topped with a small golden sphere. He dressed quickly. After nine years, the robes hung a little looser on him than they had before...”

“They walked in silence through the vast hidden city within the city. At first they stayed in the center, where bridges crossed inner moats and streams, their white balustrades doubled in blurred reflections on the water. The rooftops of the great halls were a variable yellow as clouds altered the light striking them, shifting their

color from coins to wheat to lion's fur. Below the tiles, painted latticework dripped like liquid gold through emerald and sapphire clouds."

"For the entirety of their exchange, Li Du had heard only their voices, and the silence in the library. Now, small sounds returned. He heard, faintly, a breeze rustle the dry stalks of lotuses in a nearby pond, a bird's trill, a distant bell."

"The paper exuded a gentle fragrance of angelica root."

"When I heard you had accepted a humble position in the Outer City, I was disappointed, and did not think of you again. I see now that your choice was strategic. You wanted to remain inconspicuous. But from such a lowly vantage point, how did you arrive at this version of events you claim is the truth?"

Linda says

Truth can never be told in the darkest of ink on a hollow page.

City of Ink is set in the winding streets of 18th Century Beijing with secrets set, one upon another, like the kilned tiles on ancient roof tops. Patterns seem to be set rigidly with the honorable encased amid the dishonorable. Lives can be shattered with a mere glance in the wrong direction. Li Du knows this only too well.

With scandal and isolation in his backdrop, Li Du enters into the anonymity of an ancient city teeming with individuals clawing for an existence in which your own name may weigh heavily against you. The once renowned scholar, previously at the beck and call of the Emperor, has now settled for a lowly clerkship. But this clerkship allows Li Du access to records that may clear the answers of the past.

With eyes aching and a body weary from such a cramped position, Li Du is alerted to a horrendous situation at a local tile factory just minutes away. The body of the factory owner's beautiful wife, dressed in the finest of tailored silk, is found on the floor covered in blood. Near her outstretched body is that of a man presumed to be her lover. A letter rests between them inked with a loving line from Chinese poetry.

All eyes turn to her drunken husband who may have killed the lovers while discovering them in a rage. Chinese law protects husbands as rightful in these cases. Inspector Sun confers with Li Du to write the case as closed. Li Du feels otherwise. Something tells him that there is far more at hand here than what meets the eye. It is Li Du's persistence that will unravel these silken threads.

Elsa Hart presents a top-notch novel with impeccable writing and intense research into Asian culture. Although the third in the Li Du Novels, City of Ink can most certainly be read as a standalone. Hidden character foibles and a twisting and turning storyline have always been an artform for Elsa Hart. If you've not had the opportunity to read her other novels, you may want to seek her out. Who knew that such intrigue and mysterious lifestyles from the 18th Century could carry over into modern day views?

I received a copy of City of Ink through Goodreads Giveaways. My thanks to Minotaur Books and to the talented Elsa Hart for the opportunity.

Susan Johnson says

4.5 stars

This is the third book in the Li Du, Imperial Chinese Librarian, series and the best by far. This is a complex mystery with interesting characters and full of historical information about the 18th century Beijing. It is a satisfying read on many levels.

Li Du has returned from his exile and is working as a low level clerk in the North Borough Office which gives him access to records he needs to clear the name of his mentor, Shu. Shu had been executed for a plot against the Emperor that led to Li Du's exile. He and his boss, Sun, have been called in to investigate a double murder. The two victims are Black Tile Company owner's, Hong, wife and a minor government official. It was committed in the company office and it appears the two were having an affair.

This puts the investigation squarely in the middle of the Examination preparations. A three day exam is given to thousands of young scholars who want appointments to government jobs. Only a few hundred pass the test that ensures employment and a career for them. The students are in a frenzy, repairs are being made to the Examination facilities and everyone is in an uproar. Rumors abound there are ways to ensure passage of the Examination.

Li Du's three investigations are the double murder, Examination fraud, and Shu's complicity all meet together with some amazing revelations. I was guessing until the end on how things would turn out. A prince returning from exile, a visit from Li Du's old friend Hamza and a beautiful old manuscripts add even more twists and turns.

The history part was excellent. I enjoyed reading how Beijing was physically set up and governed, the story of the Jesuit presence, the food, the numerous temples and other every day events that make the city run. It was fascinating.

Thanks to the publisher Minotaur Books and Ariana for a copy of this book in exchange for a fair review. I enjoyed it immensely and highly recommend it. I can't wait for the next one and the author left a tantalizing teaser to keep me interested. Please write fast.

eyes.2c says

Intriguing!

First up I am a huge fan of historical mysteries set in earlier times in China and other parts of Asia. I have not read Hart's previous novels featuring Li Du, but I am now hooked and will remedy that mishap very soon.

The title 'City of Ink' is so fitting as one becomes aware of the novel's setting, with the frenzied hoards of scholars that have descended on the city of Beijing.

It's the early 1700's and Li Du, a scholar of some note, previously exiled from Beijing, returns to investigate his mentor's demise. His mentor was executed for conspiracy. Working as a humble clerk, the assistant to the

Chief Inspector Sun of the North Borough Office, Li Du becomes involved with the murder inquiries into the death of a local factory owner's wife. As the investigation continues Li Du feels there is more to the death than it appears on the surface. However the city officials want things solved quickly. The husband is their obvious choice--but not necessarily Li Du's.

Beijing is swamped with candidates for the upcoming Civil Examinations. An occasion that can make or break a scholar and their family's future. Highly competitive, the city is rife with all sorts of high jinks and suspect practices. The Civil Examinations are the background that are part of the mix, part of the path of the investigations of the deaths and of the mystery around Li Du's private investigations. As Li Du references, "The paths to which I refer are not made of dirt and stone, but of paper and ink."

Bai Chengde an eminent scholar later says, "One cannot write the whole truth, even with an ink pot as deep as the sea." I love that image! And the whole truth of these murders and what happened to Li Du's mentor will bring so much into the fore, into point and counterpoint. The depths of the truth are indeed multilayered. Add to this the behaviour of various other parties that seem to touch on the subject, including the foreign priest, and Li Du finds himself walking on eggshells as past and present collide.

A captivating read!

A NetGalley ARC

Margitte says

This series reminds me of the writings of Pearl S. Buck, in which the history of China is woven into the plot and narrative, leaving the reader enriched after closing the book.

In the case of Els Hart's writing, a murder-mystery with a librarian as the sleuth, is plotted in which the reader is invited to share the life and memories of Li Du in his quest to solve an old case, which many years ago had him banned from the Emperor's court and left his best friend dead. But as fate would have it, a double murder in a tile factory leads to another present investigation he did not contemplate, yet unexpectedly and finally solved the mystery in the Emperor's library so long ago.

The novel is filled with Chinese folklore, history, and cultural events while the drama enfolds around Li Du, his friends and colleagues. Apart from all the tunnels winding through the closed-in cities and the over-populated streets, there is also the maze of intrigue heading towards the final denouement.

The story is richly textured, but without the gut and gore of brutal realism. A gentle, intriguing, fascinating account of a Beijing community in the eighteen hundreds. An excellent historical fictional account of life in China.

A wonderful read.

I want to thank Minotaur Books and Netgalley for the opportunity to review this book. Expected publishing date August 2018.

Kathleen Gray says

A way different take on the historical mystery! Set in China in the 1800s, it features Li Du, the imperial

librarian turned sleuth, who in this installment in the series has taken as job as a clerk hoping to work on answers to why his mentor Shu was executed for a crime Li Du is sure he did not commit. Shortly after, however, he finds himself drawn into a current and ugly situation involving the deaths of two people- the wife of a tile factory owner and the construction manager presumed to her lover. As he unwinds the mystery, there's a fascinating thread about civil service exams of the time. Wonderful. What makes this so special is what you'll learn about China during the period. Thanks to Netgalley for the ARC- I had not read the first two books but that did not hamper my enjoyment of this one. I'm looking forward to the next one!

Fran says

Li Du, imperial librarian, has returned to Beijing having been pardoned from exile by the Emperor. His exile was a result of his friendship with mentor, Shu. Shu had been implicated in a plot to overthrow the Emperor in 18th Century China. Li Du, instead of seeking a lofty position upon his return, accepted employment as a clerk, assistant to Chief Inspector Sun. His duties included composing letters, reports and speeches required by the North Borough office located in Beijing's Outer City. A humble job, anonymous in nature, would provide a smoke screen as Li Du investigated why, seemingly innocent Shu took the fall for a crime he likely did not commit.

The North Borough office investigated petty crimes. Violent crime was unusual in Beijing since the populace was forbidden to carry weapons. Chief Inspector Sun and Li Du were called to the Black Tile Factory, the scene of an unspeakable crime. Shock waves traveled through the city.

Hong Wenbin, owner of the Black Tile Factory had hosted a literary bash at his home. "The Bitter Plum" was chosen for book discussion with invited guests. Pan Yongfa, manager of construction, returned to the Black Tile Factory indicating he was in the midst of a military audit. The next morning, Pan and Madame Hong, wife of the factory owner, were found dead at the factory. Upon scrutiny, Li Du found a crumpled paper containing a quote from the novel "The Bitter Plum". Were Pan and Madame Hong lovers? Was this a crime of passion?

The atmosphere in Beijing was unsettling. Six thousand candidates had come to compete for two hundred fifty guaranteed official jobs. The brutal exams were divided into three sessions. Each session would takes three days. No one was allowed in or out of the examination yard once the exams began. No medical help. No replacement of writing materials. Could examiners be bribed? The upcoming "new" officials would be the next generation of "movers and shakers" arguably influencing government policy.

When Li Du needed assistance he could always depend on friend Hamza, a storyteller, fluent in many languages learned from travelling trade routes. Hamza could provide lengthy distractions by weaving multi-faceted tales. He was a colorful presence.

With infinite choices of reading material, this reader does not choose to read book series. That said, author Elsa Hart's books "Jade Dragon Mountain", "White Mirror", and "City of Ink" are the exception. These richly developed adventures provide a window into 18th century Imperial China by the extremely well versed Elsa Hart.

Thank you Ariana at Minotaur Books for an advance copy of "City of Ink" in exchange for an honest review.

Jeanette says

Li Du and Hazma are truly intriguing personalities. When they are in duo over any length of time you grasp a certain way of looking at their world (individually) in such a nearly opposite perception from each other, and yet they seem to thrive on the differences of "eyes" and intellectual interpretation for their "eyes" when they speak/ mesh in conversations, as well. That's 5 star and so is Lady Chen. I sure hope she gets involved in more than just the manipulations somewhere in future books for this series!

This was a full 3.5 star, and yet I just can't round it up. The case and tendrils of inquiry themselves went into so many directions within both the Inner and Outer city districts, that there was a period of nearly 100 pages bridging the middle that became stylish and Chinese culture integral but also was rather just a tedious kind of "he said, and then I saw" lengths. Li Du relationship and job type/ abode too under Sun doesn't ring well with me. It's too mild in comparison to his "traveling" days in exile.

Everything that had to do with restoring and honoring his mentor's memory and grandchildren teaching- that line of interest, it was superlative- and a full 4 star. I wished more of the copy was enthralled within that justification for restoring reputation and honor than in the dual and then triple murder inquiry agenda that took up much of the page count.

It's good. Not as good as #2, but I'll be reading them all. She can do shades of minutia and value for this period in China that is wonderful writing in itself. She's very good at color descriptions. And facial features too, how they can change with light and mood. Both.

This took me longer to read than most books in any mystery or period mystery genre. Especially within series work when I have read several by that author before. It actually brought to mind, D. Leon's Brunetti. It's rather deceiving in both series- the "ease" of the reading. There's so much emotional and cognitive nuance! Little tics matter in both series. Body language, attire, etc. - all truly more important to meaning than in our own Western modern civilization culture.

Another thing I loved about this book was the descriptions of how that city is set in mazes of gated areas in concentric manners and devious passages. And how at an exact hour all those dozens of gates are closed or opened. And how every single citizen of millions or 100,000's in number on any given day are "known" where they shelter or sleep. And how movement is thus so restricted for choices. And how nearly any person of any economic condition is wary of questioning a soldier to get them through a gate "late" or "emergency" because or for any reason at all.

And how many soldiers for just that gate keeper "job" entails!! Employment indeed. And how timely is the crux of the deceptions within a corrupt governmental bureaucracy that sets pivotal future cabals to influence or set paths (or traps too) for the future or "next" authority.

What top / down controls! And how corruption can then flourish within every level of that boss "pleasing aspect" or better association "practice" as well. Scary indeed. And the more things change, they more they remain the same.

Another aspect I don't like about Li Du within the city controls as in comparison to the former books, is that so few women have any conversational additions at all within this scenario. Inputs or copy- they are merely tidbits in comparison to all the men "players" within this Chinese Emperor's city world. With examinations being eminent and they are all male too! And I can say I'm on the exact same page with Lady Chen on the

practice of embroidery in general.

Forgot to note and added later: I anticipate some enjoyable Li Du novels in the future because (and this is no spoiler alert)- this ending for #3 leaves upmost intriguing possibility for the scope of Li Du's next paths and also influences/ associations.

Chris says

I was contacted by Ariana Carpentieri with Minotaur Books because I had read and reviewed a previous novel in this series and received an ARC advance copy from the publisher through NetGalley—so thanks to all involved and here is my honest review.

I read Jade Mountain—the first in the series, a while ago and was impressed by the faithful creation of the historical and cultural setting of 18th century China. I missed the second in the series, which I will find and read, but can say that I do not think that it lessened my enjoyment. These stories are true stand-alone novels much like Agatha Christie mysteries.

Too often novels of this type (historical novels) fall into one of two traps. They are either too heavy on the history to the detriment of a really compelling story. Slogging through these novels requires enduring endless “information dumps” that scream “Look how much research I have done!” The characters are often wooden and the stories less than compelling. On the other hand, you sometimes have novels in which the story could really be set anywhere and authenticity is hardly a priority and more of a gimmick.

It is a rare treat when you have a historical novel that tells a story that could only exist at a certain place in a certain time and drops you down so deep into the rabbit hole that it leaves you feeling the shift into a fully realized world. Such is the case with 18th Century Beijing in this very fine historical novel that is also a very well plotted mystery. I think it takes a special kind of writer—a historian who is also a storyteller, to pull this off. The atmosphere is finely rendered and the characters are compelling, with my favorite being Li Du's loyal associate Hamza—the consummate storyteller and comic foil to Li Du's intellectual purity. I read the last 40% of this e-book in one sitting because I had to find out how the many storylines resolved—and I was not disappointed.

Shomeret says

The publisher approved me for City of Ink on Net Galley because I had reviewed the first novel of the Li Du mystery series, Jade Dragon Mountain. When I received this third novel, I realized that I should have gotten seven lashes with a wet Chinese noodle for neglecting to read the second book in the series, The White Mirror. Last month I corrected that shortcoming and reviewed Li Du #2. My honest review of City of Ink is below.

I believe that Li Du's effort to vindicate his dead mentor could have made a compelling short story. It was certainly the strongest aspect of City of Ink, and provided a powerful ending to the novel.

Unfortunately, a great deal of narrative space was taken up with an investigation that didn't interest me nearly as much as the drama of Li Du's personal crusade to clear Shu. It was a classic mystery with the

requisite plot twist, but after the extraordinary goings on in Tibet during *The White Mirror* I expected more.

I admit to having been disappointed by the mystery aspect of *City of Ink*, but I am optimistic about the possibilities that could develop in upcoming novels.

For the blog version of my review see <http://shomeretmasked.blogspot.com/20...>

Megan says

I received an ARC from the publisher (Minotaur Books -- thank you, Ariana!) in exchange for an honest review. The third book in the Li Du series was complex and kept me guessing right up until the end. This historical mystery series is set in 18th century China with an imperial librarian, Li Du, serving as a detective. His keen intellect, impeccable research skills, and methodical analysis have served him well in both roles and in the new role he takes on in the latest offering. Books play a key role in unraveling the mysteries, which is something that I particularly enjoyed.

In this installment, the formerly exiled Li Du is called back to the capital. He never envisioned being able to come back home, but returns to Beijing and begins working as a humble clerk in the Outer City. This is a strategic decision on his part, as the new job offers anonymity and access to records he needs to unravel the mystery of his mentor Shu's execution. His relationship to Shu is what prompted the Emperor to send Li Du into exile, so he must tread lightly given his recent return.

At the beginning of the story, the wife of a local factory owner and a man who appeared to have been her lover are found dead. While his superiors believe that this was a crime of passion committed by the woman's husband, Li Du suspects the crime was more calculated. As this investigation and the secret investigation into Li Du's mentor's death progress, it becomes clear that neither case is as it seems. What is clear is that as Li Du grows closer to the truth, the truth may prove to be too dangerous to handle.

Thanks to the lush language and vivid historical details, I felt like I had been transported to 18th century China and was traveling alongside Li Du and his friend Hamza on their journey to discover the truth behind the past and present murders. The historical details enriched the story immensely and created a three dimensional world with characters that I enjoyed spending time with and would want to revisit in the future. I found the nuanced pacing of the story to be pitch perfect.

With just three books in the series, it would be easy to get caught up if the series were new to you. I would recommend reading the series in order; however, the author did an excellent job of introducing key facts from the first two books that would make it easy enough to pick this one up first, and then go back to the first two books to get the full scoop. If you enjoy historical mysteries set in foreign lands written in the tradition of Agatha Christie, this series should be right up your alley.

Pat says

4.5 stars

Book #3 in the Li Du series. Li Du, an 18th century Chinese librarian, has returned to the capital city of

Beijing after his pardon from exile by the Emperor. Li Du is working as a secretary at the north borough office which oversees local disputes, a lowly position considering his past experience and education. However, he wants to remain anonymous so he can further investigate the foiled plot to kill the Emperor; a charge which led to his exile and led to the execution of his mentor, Shu. Li Du cannot believe the charges against Shu and is out to discover the truth when a current suspicious murder of two high positioned people entangles Li Du and his supervisor into the investigation, thus postponing Li Du's answers to the past.

To be honest, I have to mention that I love this series. Li Du is a wonderful, thoughtful librarian who wants to know the truth which thrusts him into the role of 'detective'. Also, the culture of ancient China plays a huge role in this series. It is amazing to learn of ancient China in the 1700's with its knowledge and culture of the imperial families and the wealthy entrepreneurs of society versus the laboring class. Elsa Hart's writing in this book kept me reading to the next chapter. It is a mystery book not a thriller but there is definitely murder involved. So, why 4.5 stars and not a full 5? Towards the end of the book, so many storyline threads were taking place and I could not see how it would come together and solve the initial reason for Li Du being in Beijing. It felt a little slow BUT much to my enjoyment, the ending was superb! I wish I could include the ending in this review but what a spoiler! Please trust that it is a great ending and one I could not see coming. I look forward to Book #4 in this series. This can be read as a standalone if someone wants to start here but the other books are equally great. Recommend to those who enjoy a thoughtful mystery with historical background.

Thank you to Ariana of Minotaur Books for contacting me to receive an advance reader copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

?Laura says

This series hasn't disappointed me yet! I enjoyed my visit to Imperial China and loved learning about the civil service examination system, which I had never heard of before. The storyline had enough twists and turns to keep me guessing and culminated in a satisfying ending. I'm very thankful to the publisher for providing me with an advanced copy of this one!

Ratings (1 to 5)

Writing: 4.5

Plot: 4

Characters: 4

Emotional impact: 3.5

Overall rating: 4

Kathy says

The third book in the series of 18th Century China centers in Beijing where Li Du has returned to investigate the circumstances surrounding his mentor's execution 9 years earlier. We first meet him in Jade Dragon Mountain, following him then into the snows of White Mountain, both books compelling and rewarding reads. I would recommend that the books be read in order, though it is not strictly necessary. The writing is wonderful and rarely found. This book will be released in August, and I was privileged to receive ARC from Minotaur, my lucky day.

Li Du was a scholar and librarian to the Emperor. Nine years earlier his mentor Shu was gathered up into a group of nine conspirators with Ming loyalties that conspired to kill the Emperor. This event could not be accepted by Li Du or reconciled to the man he knew and respected.

The third installment picks up two years into a work assignment that has Li Du working as an assistant to his former brother-in-law, Chief Inspector Sun in the North Borough Office. The violent murders of two individuals on the grounds of The Black Tile Factory are discovered, and Sun is called to the scene. Li Du's job is to accompany and assist by taking careful notes although Sun recognizes that Li Du's intelligence and abilities are far above his own.

As the investigation of these two deaths proceeds, Li Du uncovers many hidden truths about the man who died at the Black Tile Factory. He is joined by his friend from the caravan days in the mountains, storyteller Hamza, who arrives in the city dressed in Russian garb with the book Li Du had asked him to unearth and bring to Beijing. "First, why aren't you in your library? Second, and related to the first, why is a man who saved the life of an emperor employed as a humble secretary? Third, why did you send me through the sandy deserts to fetch for you a single, priceless volume?" Yes, Hamza does enliven the scene.

The descriptions of life in Beijing, how the city was organized, the walls and gates as well as adventures outside the city are pictorial history lessons in living color.

"There was a reason for the urgency shared each evening by noble and commoner alike with the coming of night, the city closed. The thirteen great doors of the outer wall were hauled shut by straining soldiers, sealing the capitol from external threats. But danger from without was not the only concern. There were also walls to separate the Inner City from the Outer City and divide the buroughs. Hundreds of wooden doors, guarded by soldiers, barred the alleys. Citizens and residents who wished to spend the night in their own beds had until the drum towers announced the first watch of night to reach their neighborhoods....Anonymous movement was the prerogative of gods and ghosts."

It will be difficult to wait for the fourth book in this series. I know I will have to go back and read all the books again as Elsa Hart has given us a very rich time, place and central figure in Li Du, all to be admired.
