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MOBILE REGISTER

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SouthernBound

'Palace of Tears' a fantasy perfect for troubled times

Every so often a novel comes along that offers pure escape, carrying one far from ordinary cares. Such is Alex Lytle Crouter's "The Palace of Tears" (Delta, paper, \$12.95), a spice-scented magic-carpet ride through the world of the odalisque. Crouter is a native of Turkey who now divides her time between San Francisco and Paris. She is an accomplished screenplay writer and the author of the non-fiction best seller "Harem: The World Behind the Veil." "The Palace of Tears" is her first novel.

The tale is set in 1868, when "Europe was in a frenzy, seeking its spiritual opposite in the recesses of the Maghreb and the Levant." The protagonist, Casimir de Chateaufort, is a bored French vintner seeking some higher purpose. While strolling among Paris shops, he comes upon a dealer in Orientalia. The store is "a somber space" with "a strongly pungent smell of untanned leather mingled inside with attar of roses." He browses the goods, the usual "bric-a-brac from the Orient—the hookah, the turban, the dagger, the tambourine.... But then he discovers an arresting miniature of a woman "in a green calfan with flowing sleeves, embroidered with golden tulips.... Her eyes are almond and beguile him—in one blue, the other yellow."

And so he travels in search of this creature, first alone and then with the Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III. Crouter's descriptions of the world are lyrical and colorful. Casimir's first glimpse of Egypt reveals "shimmering light that bounced like quicksilver on the water, and the pale present a message of deliciously villainous faces.... But best of all is Constantinople, the meeting place of East and West, its towering minarets seen through the haze of the Sultan's harem is off-limits to Casimir, and all other men for that matter, but Crouter gives the reader a peek: "The Mother Sultana, Perleve, sat on a divan surrounded by numerous ladies dressed in damask Harem pants, brocaded with silver flowers under smocks of silk gossamer with long sleeves, hanging halfway down the arms. On their heads, they wore caps embroidered with gold and silver, from which dangled large bouquets of jewels made to look like flowers. Their hair, divided into tresses and braided with pearls and rubins, cascaded in full length behind."

In due course Casimir learns the identity of the mysterious woman in the miniature. She is Le Poupée (French for "doll") the former companion of a noblewoman, now exiled to the Palace of Tears. Even before they meet, they experience the mystical of the red oryx, or parallel dream. During nights permeated by the odor of opium poppy blossoms, Casimir and Le Poupée each dream of the other each other in a moonlit garden.

Beside himself with desire, Casimir manages to rescue Le Poupée from her exile and takes her away to Greece. By the day lovers cultivate grapes and by night, "deliciously entangled," they enjoy the rose a deux, "chasing each other through a hall of mirrors that seemed to stretch into infinity."

"The Palace of Tears" is a swiftly-paced read with short chapters and rapidly shifting scenes. Throughout, Crouter manages never to lose her exotic tone. And her interweaving of historical incidents (like the construction of the Suez Canal) and personalities (like the Empress Eugénie) with the overarching fairy tale gives the work a satisfying resonance. Some reviewers have taken Crouter to task for copying themes earlier explored by the likes of Jorge Luis Borges, Laura Winters, of the New York Times, even dismissed her lapidary prose as "florid and derivative."

How one feels about this little novel will depend in large measure on how receptive one is to magical realism and fantasy. Like most such works, it must be approached in the proper frame of mind. So find a pot of yellow light in a small corner somewhere, brew a cup of Turkish tea and sit down with "The Palace of Tears." It is a pleasurable distraction in a troubled time.

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Best Sellers

- HARDCOVER FICTION**
1. "The Summons" by John Grisham (Doubleday)
 2. "Up Country" by Nelson DeMille (Warner Books)
 3. "Journey Through Heartbreak" by Mattie J. Stapanak (DVP Books/Hyperion)
 4. "The Connections" by Jonathan Franzen (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux)
 5. "The Diary of Ellen Rimbauer" edited by Joyce Reardon (Hyperion)
 6. "The Millionaire" by Brad Meltzer (Warner)
 7. "Tippecanoe Blues" by Eric Lipton (William Morrow)
 8. "Hunting Season" by Nevada Barr (Putnam)
 9. "The Snow Garden" by Christopher Yoo (F&V/Miramax Books)
 10. "Bakset Case" by Carl Hiaasen (Knopf)
- NONFICTIONAL**
1. "Self Matters: Creating Your Life from the Inside Out" by Phillip C. McGraw (Simon & Schuster) Source
 2. "The Wisdom of Menopausal" by Christine Northrup (Bantam)
 3. "Bare: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News" by Bernard Goldberg (Random)
 4. "Who Moved My Cheese?" by Spencer Johnson (Putnam)
 5. "Body for Hire" by Bill Priddy (Simon & Schuster)
 6. "Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces" by Tom Clancy, Gen. Carl Sistrup (Putnam)
 7. "Sacred Contracts" by Caroline Myss (Harmony)
 8. "Satisfaction: The Art of the Female Orgasm" by Kim Cattrall, Mark Levinson (Warner Books)
 9. "Sagad White Men: And Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation" by Michael Moore (Harper)
 10. "The Bureau and the Mob" by David A. Vise (Atlantic Monthly Press)
- MASS MARKET PAPERBACKS**
1. "A Painted House" by John Grisham (Dell)
 2. "A Walk to Remember" by Nicholas Sparks (Warner)
 3. "His to Die" by James Patterson (Warner)
 4. "The Bonehunter's Daughter" by Amy Tan (Ballantine)
 5. "Lone Eagle" by Geraldine Steel (Dell)
 6. "Black Hawk Down" by Mark Bowden (Signet)
 7. "Dr. Alton: New Diet Revolution" by Robert C. Atkins, M.D. (Avon)
 8. "The Fellowship of the Ring" by J.R.R. Tolkien (Del Rey)
 9. "The Two Towers: The Lord of the Rings Part 2" by J.R.R. Tolkien (Del Rey)
 10. "Burn Factor" by Kyle Mills (Harper Torch)

—Source: Publishers Weekly

Splintered Bones
By Carolyn Haines
Delacorte, \$23.95

Reviewed by **ELISABETH A. DOERING**
Special to the Register

I'm afraid of following her own instincts. Carolyn Haines has seen her writing hunches pay off. In 1998 Haines was awarded a writing fellowship from the Alabama Council on the Arts. The first mystery in her "Bones" series was auctioned off with seven publishing houses bidding on the deal. Among her 44 published books of fiction is "Summer of the Redeemers," which was a candidate for the Pulitzer Prize.

The Lucedale, Miss., native recently cut the eight-to-five, rat-race cord to devote herself full time to her craft. This leap of faith has rendered sweet rewards. In bookstores this week is Haines' latest offering, "Splintered Bones," which follows in the steps of "Them Bones" and "Buried Bones."

Haines is a Southern storyteller of style and skill. Her third suspense series novel reflects her polished prose. Effective metaphors, such as "This was the South in her finest attire," display her rich fluidity of language. In "Splintered Bones" superb Sarah Booth Delaney leads her own life in danger as she tries to clear her childhood friend, Lee McCreedy, charged with murdering her husband. Refusing legal representation, Lee summons Booth to the jail and pleads for her assistance. Since she is in financial straits, she offers to pay for Sarah's investigative services by promising her a portion of the stock fees on her prized horse, Avenger. Thus the Delaney Detective Agency takes on the case.

With strong reservations, Sarah also agrees to care for Lee's only child, Kip, she of the spiked burgundy hair, black leather, and heavy eyeliner. Fourteen-year-old Kip is a suspect in the murder — she detected her father who repeatedly beat her mother bloody. She comes to stay at Dalhia House, Sarah's ancestral home.

Other suspects in the murder are Bradford "Bud" Lynch, a smooth-talking, well-built Texas horse trainer, and Tony LaCoco, a crime-family gambling boss from Louisiana. Also there is an array of prime Daddy's Girls including Krystal Brook, a transformed Nashville country-music singer who brings the house down at a "Jail and Bar" benefit for the accused with her rendition of the Dixie Chicks' "Goodbye Earl."

Sarah immediately summons her investigative associate, Tinkie, into action. A bona fide Daddy's Girl who dresses in Chanel suits, Tinkie is assigned the task of spying on suspects at The Club and among the less-haunting crowd. When Tinkie scores two juicy invites to attend the famous Chesterfield Hunt Ball scramble for a date, Jitty, the bossy resident ghost of Dalhia House for four generations, prods Sarah all the more to marry in order to produce an heir.

Stumbling upon blood-stained carpets and additional dead bodies, Sarah eventually gets closer to the true murderer and to the possibility of her own demise. The intricate plot and well-developed main character deliver a knockout conclusion.

Heading out to Haines' farmhouse in Semmes, one maneuvers along a bumpy road. In Haines' driveway a dusty red Ford pickup with red clay-caked tires is spotted, and the smell of freshly mown spring grass whiffs air. One is immediately transported to Zinnia, the Mississippi Delta setting of Haines' "Bones" mysteries.

Haines stands at the front door clad in a peach-colored sweatshirt, blue jeans and muddy tennis shoes, with sunglasses atop her head. She extends a hearty invitation to a strict warning: The house is a mess. Walls have been knocked out and cabinet doors, pulled off the hinges by the writer herself, sit on the kitchen floor. Apologizing for the clutter, she offers her guest a chair in the study. Haines carries two glasses of water into the room and seats a seat at her desk. Windowed sunlight sparkles in her blue eyes as she speaks about her new book.

Haines sits water between graciously answering questions. Her "Splintered Bones" protagonist would have opted for Jack Daniels on the rocks. "If I belonged to the elite society of Daddy's Girls, I would have drunk white wine. Lucky for me, I could keep company with the rowdy boys," Sarah declares while reaching over the ballroom for her crystal decanter of whiskey.

A renowned Daddy's Girl, Sarah Booth Delaney is a Southern feminist. As to why the true Daddy's Girls both loved and disdained her, ah, Haines shrugs. "She is off the leash. That character is one independent woman."

Haines leads her visitor outside to the strapping stables to feed her

horses. Looking around the tidy floor, Haines gins, "It's a cryin' shame when the barn is cleaner than the house." The equestrienne rattles a feed bucket and her three horses, Scrapiron, Mirrage, and Co-gar fall into the barn.



country to tell a story. Telling a story is what I strive for in my fiction. So, as a writer of stories, these are important forms of music to me. Plus, they offer a strange combination of joy, sadness and sex."

A fellow mystery writer recently termed Haines "Nancy Drew meets William Faulkner." Faulkner himself could not have asked for a better female sleuth. Nor could readers of "Splintered Bones" ask for a better choice than Sarah Booth Delaney.

Haines will sign copies of her new novel on Saturday from 2-4 p.m. at Page and Palette in Fairhope. For information and directions, call 928-2325.

Elisabeth Doering is a freelance writer who lives in Mobile.

Book magazine claims independence despite ties to chain

By **CARLIN ROMANO**
Knight-Ridder

NEW YORK — The magazine they call Book is basking in the limelight.

Chicago born and bred, the 3-year-old glossy bimonthly recently moved to Manhattan and threw a swank literary party — the kind *What's Her-Name* virtually trademarked. The magazine's editor, Jerome Kramer, called the store "a shot across the bow" of the publishing world.

More than 1 million subscribers know that Book is packed with literary stories and reviews, usually topped by a distinctive cover: a giant color photo of an author.

What almost all don't know is that Book also has a distinctive business plan and a heavy-weight backer — giant books retailer Barnes & Noble, which now owns 50 percent of the magazine. B&N's Readers' Advantage discount program, which includes a year's subscription to Book, is responsible for 80 percent of the periodical's remarkable circulation of 1.3 million.

Yes, 1.3 million. Twice the circulation of Tina Brown's much ballyhooed *Talk* at its demise. Does the retailer's quiet involvement matter to Book's credibility?

One publishing exec at last month's fancy party, marveling at the expense of the promotion, remarked (though not for attribution): "I think it's Barnes & Noble money, but I'm not sure exactly how." Another, similarly shy, volunteered that perception right away.

Mary Gleason, Book's publisher, wants to correct that perception right away. "We're an independent magazine," he says. B&N simply thinks it's "a great magazine" that interests the company's customers. "To their credit, they recognize that the magazine is only of the highest value to readers if it's got an independent editorial voice."

Gleason and editor-in-chief Kramer say there's no editorial consultation with Barnes & Noble.



friends at Georgetown University and Northwest's Medill School of Journalism. Gleason, former editor of the Cincinnati Business Courier, and Kramer, editor of a magazine for railroad engineers, wanted to do what Kramer calls "a passionate magazine for people who love to read."

They founded Book with their own capital and that of some private investors. Their first issue came out in October/November 1998, with Tom Wolfe on the cover.

The first issue sold about 20,000. Circulation built slowly, helped by distribution deals with chain stores. One magazine served as a model.

"The Saturday Review was not just literature, but about all things literary," Kramer says. "Udipek wrote me a nice note saying that he liked the magazine, that it seemed like the closest thing we had to the old Saturday Review."

Kramer takes pride in his magazine's "unflappable Midwest sensibility. 'Less pleased with itself' than the East Coast variety. 'We wanted to be national, very accessible, very friendly, middle-class.'"

And then G&K, so to speak, met B&N. The retailer wants its Readers' Advantage program "to be something other than a straight-ahead discount club," Kramer recalls. At first, program registrants got a tote bag. B&N wanted to offer more to the membership, whose size it won't

disclose. The shift came in late 2000, when B&N bought out Book's outside investors, taking a 50 percent ownership role. A Book subscription became part of the Readers' Advantage package.

Book's circulation zoomed. Better-known bylines showed up. It would be profitable, Gleason says to 10 issues a year and double office space for its own says it hopes to be so this year.

Kramer describes himself and Gleason as "old-school journalists" and "ethically scrupulous." Both understand the conflict-of-interest dangers of their B&N partnership.

Kramer acknowledges that people say things like: "It's so positive — therefore it must be a promotional tool." But Book's tone, he insists, comes from its philosophy, not its partner. His feeling is "that unless somebody who should be writing a really good book writes a lousy one, I don't want to spend a lot of ink telling people about a book they wouldn't have heard of anyway, and kicking it."

In fact, the "perception" of Book as promotional tool is unfair. From the beginning, the magazine has run negative reviews, been less breathless in its profiles than much magazine coverage, and printed critical letters. Its "Shop Watch" profiles independent stores — key competitors of B&N.

Can Book's idiosyncratic business plan succeed? "Good grief!" explains John F. Baker, editorial director of Publishers Weekly, when told of Book's current 1.3 million circulation. He once edited a magazine called *Book Views* that folded after 18 months for the same reason, he says, that Book faces no competitors: "The advertising simply isn't there."

Baker links Book "well-enough done" but doesn't see how "you can have a magazine like this survive on subscriptions and newstand sales only." On the ethics front, he doesn't think Book's relationship with Barnes & Noble's support so long as it doesn't "push" the retailer's agendas — which, he says, it doesn't.

Gleason points out that Book's strategy for advertising revenue, which was up 114 percent in 2001, looks beyond publishers. He's depending on the industry truman that coverage draws the wealthy, highly educated readers that blue-chip advertisers want. So far, he says, the strategy is working. Advertisers include Lexus and Ferragamo — the big-money GQ kind.

Gleason takes pride in that. Kramer exudes similar self-confidence. "We're the small-time Midwest underdog," he says, shrugging. "But we've got a shot at being one of the most important voices in literary America precisely because we're not doing the same thing that's been done before."