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Shore of Pearls: A Novel of Murder, Plague, and the Prison Island of Hainan (T'ang Trilogy Book 2)

Eleanor Cooney, Daniel Altieri

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Book Two of the T'ang Trilogy, along with IRON EMPRESS and THE COURT OF THE LION: Published in Europe and now making its US debut, SHORE OF PEARLS occurs in a four-year interval in IRON EMPRESS. In 671, Magistrate Dee Jen-chieh flees the capital city of Loyang after witnessing the ghastly "trial" of twenty-five scholars accused of fomenting rebellion against the Empress Wu Tse-tien: their severed heads are impaled atop the iron spikes of a false Buddhist temple as "charges" against each are read. Until that moment, Dee had not despaired that his vanished erstwhile friend and undercover collaborator—the tall, enigmatic Tibetan monk-magician Hsueh Huai-i, who'd boasted that no home or palace was so exalted that he could not inveigle his way in—would give Dee a sign: Yes, it's true that I lie down with the Empress in her bed, but only so that I can procure the evidence to prove her a murderess. The spiked heads are indeed a sign from Hsueh, but not the one Dee had hoped for. His worst fear is confirmed: Hsueh has "turned," and the message is eloquent: There is one empty spike, one head missing, Master Dee—yours.

Dee takes a long, sweltering journey south to the city of Canton, and thence, he hopes, to the hellish prison island of Hainan, also called the Shore of Pearls, where the Empress is fond of exiling "inconvenient" officials, especially those whose suffering brings her the most pleasure—poets, scholars, defenseless elderly men. The doomed Scholar's Rebellion sent many such men to the island, and Dee is determined to go there, find them, and perhaps bring them home. Canton's throngs, seething markets and ships from every part of the known world fascinate Dee, but he means to waste no time in getting to the island. He is instantly thwarted: an entrenched, clannish eunuch bureaucracy blocks his way; no amount of perfume can mask the redolence of corruption and graft. Bubonic plague has also arrived in the city, as has a brilliant Persian physician whom Dee befriends. Abu Zeed, who has a theory about rats, fleas and plague, is as eager as Dee to get to the island. The exotic, numberless diseases of the tropics are what attract the insatiably curious physician. Another Persian befriends Dee—a woman, who causes Dee to put his two faraway wives out of his mind and thoughts.

In distant Loyang, Hsueh Huai-i is hard at work, in every sense, assisting the Empress in her ultimate ascent: public "miracles" suggest that Wu's rule is fulfillment of Buddhist prophecy. Soon, Hsueh, on a mission for Wu, materializes in Canton like a phantasm, carrying with him an ornate box, empty for now, but of a size and shape suitable to transport a human head…

Dee and Abu Zeed conspire and sleuth, and in the midst of a rash of murders of prominent eunuchs in Canton, finally travel to the island. An uprising of prisoners and lepers, an encounter with a bizarre insect-worshipping cult and a harrowing escape from agents of the Empress are but a few of the dangers the two elude before fleeing the island. Both learn deep lessons about loyalty and betrayal, and the shifting, overlapping, shape-changing nature of the two.

"Sensuality and cruelty, barbarism and refinement, the plot teeming with tension, all is in suspense until the end for both the Magistrate and the reader…"
—L'Yonne Republicaine, Paris

About the Authors:

Eleanor Cooney is the author of DEATH IN SLOW MOTION (HarperCollins 2004, Kindle edition 2013). She recently completed a novel, a dark-but-humorous literary “noir” thriller set in Wisconsin in the present and in the 1890s.

Daniel Altieri holds degrees in Oriental language and civilization from Brown University and the University of Pennsylvania. His recent short stories and full-length fiction reflect the American experience, including a newly-completed novel about growing up in the iconic 1950s.

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Sarah Maddocks:

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