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Review

A 'CRAZY QUILT'

The latest William Monk mystery confuses as it entertains

Barrett, Diana E.

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Perry, Anne and Nevler, Leona. *Slaves of Obsession.* Ballantine Books, 2000-11-01. ISBN 345433262

Well-known for her ability to weave mystery, history, details of daily life, and 19th century technology into a fine Victorian tapestry, Anne Perry constructs more of a crazy quilt in **Slaves of Obsession**, the 11th book in her William Monk series.

The novel opens in London on the eve of the American Civil War. Lyman Breeland, a Union officer, aims to reverse the sale of rifles promised to the Confederacy. Arms dealer Daniel Alberton refuses to renege on his word, and when he is found murdered, Breeland is implicated but cannot be questioned, for he apparently has absconded to America with the rifles and with Alberton's 16-year-old daughter, Merrit, who is infatuated with the idealistic officer's anti-slavery rhetoric.

Not one to give up so easily, the widowed Mrs. Alberton hires Monk and his wife Hester to locate and return her daughter. If, in the process, they can also deliver Breeland, so much the better. Perry creates contrasting personalities in the novel's antagonists. Breeland's anti-slavery ideals match our own, but his lack of concern for Merrit when she is arrested as his accomplice paints him as cold and unappealing. Philo Trace, the Confederate who originally purchased the rifles, reluctantly contemplates the abolition of slavery, arguing that the Union and England willingly benefit from its products, yet he appears warm and caring in his concern for Merrit and her mother. Will Perry dare make either of these gentlemen the true villain?

Perry writes graphic, convincing war scenes, and creates an interesting role reversal as Monk and his wife unwittingly become involved in the first battle at

Manassas. The chaos and carnage overwhelm Monk, who has never experienced war. Hester relives the horrors of mangled bodies, filth, and death she witnessed in the Crimea where she served with Florence Nightingale. She nurses the wounded in the field and at a makeshift hospital set up in Sudley Church; she removes a bullet, amputates an arm, and seems well versed in anatomy. Since Nightingale focused on cleanliness for religious reasons and germ theory awaited discovery, those interested in 19th century medical care may find areas for debate, and wonder how much Perry has played with Hester's probable knowledge and surgical background.

Unfortunately, the quickness and intricacy of plot that give **Slaves of Obsession** so much of its compulsive readability have attendant drawbacks. The book is not always well organized and lacks in clarity at times. Diverse events surrounding Mediterranean pirates, the Third Chinese War, and the death of an artist's model seem patched together and not always believably related. Scattered throughout the book are inconsistencies in plot detail and a lack of tight editing. For example, while still alive, Alberton had employed William Monk to investigate blackmail, but that subplot ties in only weakly at the end of the novel. Hints about Monk's possible prior connections to slavery are confusing, especially to first-time readers of the series.

Few history-mystery writers surpass Anne Perry, but readers new to the genre may wish to begin their association with William Monk by starting with the first book in the series, *Face of a Stranger*. And devoted readers of Civil War fiction might enjoy comparing Hester's nursing experiences to those of a Richmond woman in Ann McMillan's novel *Dead March*.

A historical researcher, Diana E. Barrett (dbarrett@triton.net) is co-editor (with Jo Ellyn Clarey) of a work-in-progress about history-mystery novels by women writers.