

Reviews

ANCIENT EGYPT

CITY OF THE DEAD: A Seven Wonders Novel

T. L. Higley, B&H, 2008, \$14.99, pb, 400pp, 9780805447316

When Pharaoh's chief wife is found dead, Hemiunu, the Grand Vizier who oversees the building of the Great Pyramid, is suspected of murder. It does not help that they were once in love and that Pharaoh knows it. Hemiunu must prove his innocence, and in the process he forges a bond with Neferet, a young woman who believes in one true God. This book is a Christian historical, the second in a projected series, each connected to one of the Seven Great Wonders of the ancient world. From time to time, Neferet voices what seems remarkably like modern Protestant theology. There is no hint of the actual historical roots of monotheism, and as pyramid builders talk about "timelines," and explain that they must "rework all the numbers," it's hard to believe you're in ancient Egypt. However, Hemiunu is a likable and complex character. As he uncovers the connection between the queen's killing and a long-ago suspicious death, he also confronts his own imperfections as a man. The mystery has enough twists and turns to satisfy any reader and builds to a suspenseful climax.

Phyllis T. Smith

CLASSICAL

SPQR XII: Oracle of the Dead

John Maddox Roberts, Minotaur, 2008, \$24.95/ C\$27.95, hb, 240pp, 9780312380939

In this, the twelfth of Roberts' Roman mystery series featuring his sleuth Decius Caecilius Metellus, Italy is on the brink of civil war. Decius, who is serving his year as *praetor* (judge), decides to escape the tensions of Rome and tour the resort towns of Campania, doing a little judging and a lot of relaxing. But Campania too is in a ferment of political and ethnic strife. This comes to a head when the priests of a local temple of Apollo are found murdered and suspicion falls on the black-robed priestesses of Hecate, who utter prophecies to the credulous peasantry in a Stygian chamber beneath the temple. As Decius investigates, the bodies pile up and he too narrowly escapes death.

Roberts serves up a large helping of historical background (sometimes, one feels, almost too much) and is very informative about the *curiosa* of Roman religion. The plot is well-paced and neatly resolved. For this reader, the book is marred only by dialogue that strikes the ear as rather too modern and slangy.

Bruce Macbain

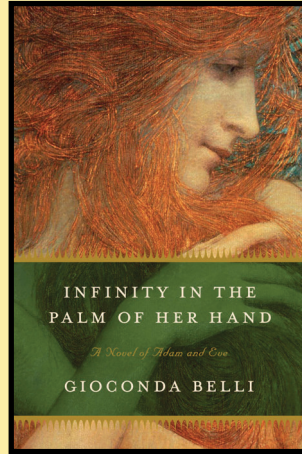
The Three Faces of *Eve*

BIBLICAL

EDITORS' CHOICE

INFINITY IN THE PALM OF HER HAND

Gioconda Belli (trans. Margaret Sayers Peden), HarperCollins, 2009, \$23.95/C\$28.95, hb, 244pp, 9780061673641.



Gioconda Belli's daring feat of climbing inside the world of Adam and Eve, from their creation through the fall and toward a dawn of civilization, makes an extraordinary read. Her roots as a poet are amply evident, even in translation, as she constructs a Blakean idyll that is both nostalgic and horrifying. She makes Adam and Eve into real characters nonetheless, and deals with the issue of primacy between them and their roles in the fall very imaginatively.

One of her most seductive characters is the serpent, who is not cast as completely evil, and who is Eve's window into the invisible God who created their paradise and then flung them out of it—because Eve ate of the tree of knowledge. No apples here, just figs.

Time is compressed in this slim volume, which takes us all the way to Cain's slaying of Abel. The rich language is never ponderous, and despite the fact that we all know what happens, Belli keeps us engaged in her story, using words like a magical slide that, once you begin the descent,

will not let you off until it ends.

Most fascinating to me is the way she neatly leads us from the Creationist view of the origin of mankind to a place where the door to Darwinism is wide open. This fast, delicious book is a highly recommended read.

Susanne Dunlap

EVE: A Novel of the First Woman

Elissa Elliott, Delacorte, 2009, \$24.00, hb, 421pp, 9780385341448

The Old Testament tale of Eve informs this imaginative, poetic novel of what the first woman's life might have been like, both before and after her expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The story of Adam and Eve's life in the Garden of Eden is told via flashbacks, and both Eve and her daughters struggle with the possibility of returning to the sacred place. Each chapter is narrated by and focuses on the experiences of Eve or one of her three daughters, and Elliott skillfully uses different narrative points-of-view and voices to further the character development. Eve is wise and world-weary, both beaten down by the struggles of her life and faith and comforted by the presence of Elohim. Aya, the middle daughter, is shrewd and opinionated, but her mangled foot keeps her from the public eye. Youngest daughter Dara speaks with a child's voice as she is sent from her home to assist the Mesopotamian women in the village near her family's settlement with their children, and chapters focusing on Naava, the eldest and most attractive of Eve's daughters, are told in the third person, reminding the reader that Naava's personal story is being dictated by outside forces rather than her own desires. The novel also delves into the Cain and Abel story, describing the origins of their feud and its escalation into murder.

Elliott draws not only on Jewish and Christian scholarship but also on Mesopotamian history for her interpretation, and an afterword describes the sources consulted and the author's creative process. Biblical literalists may take affront at Elliott's interpretation of the creation story and assertion that Adam and Eve were not the first man and woman on Earth, but readers who enjoy woman-centered reinterpretations of Old Testament texts (such as Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*) will be drawn to *Eve*.

Nanette Donohue

HAVAH: The Story of Eve

Tosca Lee, NavPress, 2008, \$12.99, pb, 363pp, 9781600061240

A whisper in my ear. Wake!

Much has been written about Eve (called Havah in this novel), the seductress who ate the forbidden fruit and thus brought about the fall of mankind, but I doubt her heart has ever been so deeply plumbed as in this lyrical novel by Tosca Lee. Havah comes to consciousness in the Garden of Eden, a place where she experiences a sublime intimacy with both the creator and the creation (most particularly with her husband, Adam).

Havah is a fascinating novel about human relationships at the dawn of time. Although Havah's marriage begins in the perfection of Paradise, and then lasts nearly a thousand years, its very ordinariness is amusing. When Havah and Adam are cast out of Eden, they must acquire all the skills necessary for their survival, including hunting, farming, and midwifery—and Adam must learn to deal with a wife who experiences depression and moodiness. As time passes, and their offspring multiply and spread out over the region, there is a blossoming not only of art and trade, but also of infidelity, idolatry, and murder. Filled with beautiful imagery, *Havah* is an enjoyable read about the "Great Mother" of us all.

Nancy J. Attwell