



The Sultan's Seal

A Novel

Jenny White

“Court life and customs in old Istanbul are thrillingly captured here, with readers easily transported back to those days when mystery and intrigue lurked around every corner.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

“At its best, a good historical novel takes us to another world. It lets us begin to know the place, the people, the ways. In *THE SULTAN'S SEAL*, Jenny White does this remarkably well.”

—Octavia E. Butler

“White’s intelligent, sensuous writing makes a promising debut.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

It is 1886, and the Ottoman Empire, though regarded by many as the “sick man of Europe,” still rules its subjects from the fabled city of Istanbul, where the sultan’s power is absolute. His hold on the outlying provinces is weakening, and the great nations of the west circle, staking out their claims on the empire’s flanks. In the palace court, traditionalist autocrats and hotheaded young Turks embracing revolutionary ideas vie for influence, weaving intrigues that wind from the crowded Jewish quarter to the decorous tea parties of the British Embassy to the imperial harem with its hundreds of concubines and eunuchs. Pull a single thread, and the 500-year-old tapestry of Ottoman harmony and order can unravel in the blink of an eye. Jenny White’s debut novel **THE SULTAN’S SEAL** [W.W. Norton; Publication Date: February 13, 2006; \$24.95 cloth] takes us to this dangerous time, illuminating a grand civilization with mystery at its center.

On a warm night in June, Kamil Pasha will be awakened from his bed to hear of a bizarre tragedy, the drowning of an unidentified British woman that bears a strange resemblance to the unsolved murder of a British governess many years ago, an investigation that dead-ended after leaving many of those involved dead or disgraced. The body Kamil Pasha examines under a dawning sky is naked, save for two pieces of jewelry—a stunning gold bracelet and a pendant engraved with the proprietary seal of the sultan.

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A lover of facts and of orchids, Kamil Pasha is one of the secular magistrates newly appointed by reform-minded officials. He is committed to the enlightened ideal of reason that he hopes will once again make the Ottoman Empire the most advanced nation on Earth—but his ideals are about to be weighed against his love of justice and everyone dear to him. For the imperturbable magistrate is entering a world where even his allies have hidden agendas.

Who can Kamil trust? There is Sybil Hanoum, the British ambassador's plucky young daughter. Her desire for an adventure beyond the staid social events proper to her station feeds her curiosity about the mysterious deaths and endears her to the tough-minded magistrate. Kamil befriends her irrepressible cousin, Bernie, an uncouth American with little patience for the subtleties of courtly presentation, who is in Istanbul to teach and write a book. A literary scholar, he recognizes the obscure poem inscribed on the dead woman's pendant. There is also Kamil's friend and long time colleague, Michel Sevy, the resourceful Jewish medical examiner, with an unnerving habit of appearing suddenly at the magistrate's side.

And there is another voice in these pages that circles around Kamil and Sybil's separate investigations, that of the young Muslim woman Janaan, who stumbled upon the body of that first British governess, the one found dead on her family's estate when she was but a child. Recent events have brought upon her one tragedy after another in the wake of her parents' separation, her cousin's disgrace and her father's heavy-handed efforts to force her into a marriage to stay on the Sultan's right side. She has become a keeper of many secrets—but are they political secrets, or does Janaan carry her own, perhaps just as deadly?

Jenny White, a professor of anthropology and the author of numerous nonfiction works on Turkish society and politics, combines her thorough knowledge of the period's manners and history with a lyrical storyteller's voice to create a compelling narrative of intrigue. She brings to life the twilight of the Ottoman Empire, a perfect, beautiful symbol of tradition inching toward the precipice of modernity, with the winner still unsure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenny White is a professor of anthropology and has authored a number of non-fiction works on Turkey and Turkish society. *The Sultan's Seal* is her first novel. She lives in Boston.

TITLE: THE SULTAN'S SEAL

AUTHOR: Jenny White

PUBLICATION DATE: February 13, 2006

PRICE: \$24.95 cloth

ISBN: 0-393-06099-3