

PETALUMA
ARGUS 150 COURIER

Historical romance

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For Petaluma novelist Karen Mercury, writing historical fiction is a way to tell a passionate fictional tale in an historic African setting during a highly-charged period when a whole African kingdom was destroyed overnight. The setting is Benin, in the Niger Delta, circa 1897.

Classified as historical fiction due to its depth of detail of the times, "The Hinterlands," released in March by Medallion Press, nevertheless has all the elements of a successful romance novel in an exotic setting.

For Mercury, "The Hinterlands" is a culmination of many years of fascination with and appreciation of African peoples and culture.

"If I could accomplish anything with this book, it would be to make people more aware and more interested in Africa," she says. Mercury commends her hero, singer and activist Bono of the Irish rock group U2, because he tells people straight out that one person dies every six

seconds of AIDS in Africa currently. "When Rwanda was happening, no one paid attention," says Mercury.

She highlights the "tiny aspects from the smell of a cook fire" to the fact that "Africans love talking, they hate quiet—beautiful lightning flashes at night."

In northern Kenya, she says, "you'd hear the tribesmen and feel them stomping up and down when they were dancing, or a herd of goats and camels would walk past your head when you try to sleep at 110 degrees at night. The feeling is so serene."

Through reading, she became intrigued with human sacrifice in Benin, Nigeria, as it was practiced in 1897. She was amazed. "You'd expect that this was a practice of a much earlier culture, yet Benin was still completely untouched by technology and progress."

It was the British who proved the downfall of the people of Benin. Their kingdom was wiped out in one day because the king of Benin refused to open up the trade route to the British. The British Army attacked in order to "stop human sacrifice," which the Benin people had seen as a way to visit dead relatives and tell the dead the news of the living.

"What we come to understand is that we just traded one sort of human savagery for another," says Mercury.

Reviewers of both romance and historic fiction genres have given the book high marks. Kristi Ahlers of Historical Romance Writers says, "Ms. Mercury has penned a very sensual and descriptive read that fans of historic fiction will not want to miss." Romance Reviews Today says "Passion, lust and greed seethe beneath the lush beauty of the jungle."

Romance is as hot as the weather in "The Hinterlands." Heroine Elle Bowie, an anthropologist from New York researching clitoridectomy but with a hidden agenda, more than meets her match in legendary leopard hunter Brendan Donivan, who battles fiercely to save his adopted homeland from ensuing armies and is often seen wearing a kilt. The dialogue tends toward the erotic and heats up the story. No wonder, since Mercury consults with Erotica Readers and Writers Association.

A very well read woman, Mercury credits Henry Miller, among many others, with inspiring her to take up writing novels.

She is currently working on a second book for Medallion Press, "The Four Quarters of the World," set in 1866 in Abyssinia, due to be published in February 2006.

Dr. Richard Pankhurst, considered the world's foremost researcher on Ethiopia, is reviewing her manuscript for historical accuracy. The new tale is compelling to Mercury because it's a grand epic set in 1868. She describes it as "a history that is so unique and an emperor who took hostages, leading the British army to send 30,000 soldiers to rescue the missionaries and envoys.

"Another wild tale," says Mercury. "I love that stuff because I could not make it up."

Among her most treasured African art pieces are a Dan wooden mask from Liberia with dreadlocks, which evokes a feeling that the Spirit of the Father is present for tribe members, and an authentic Benin bronze head from the 1960s. She is grateful for her cache, but also

admires turn of the century "Punitive Expedition" bronze busts which are sold for millions of dollars to museums and other collectors.

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