

The Aviary Gate by Katie Hickman. Bloomsbury 2008.

Reading a novel by an author whose work you have not previously encountered is usually hugely disappointing or utterly wonderful, but rarely, if ever, something in between.

The Aviary Gate is the first book by Katie Hickman that I have read and within a few pages of starting it I was utterly transported to 16th century Constantinople, in which the majority of the tale is set, and felt a surge of excitement akin to that engendered by my first Joanna Trollope novel, a certainty of having found an amazing writer whose future work I would await with keen anticipation.

The Aviary Gate is set in two time zones, the present day, as a troubled research student sits in the Bodleian library trying to focus her mind on her work, and in Ottoman Constantinople at the height of its power and seductive appeal. The research student, Elizabeth, finds a document which takes her on a journey to modern Istanbul, both escaping from a destructive love affair and searching for the story of an Englishwoman abducted into the Sultan's harem over four centuries before. The 16th century part of the story, which contains an array of superbly drawn characters, focuses on the affairs of the royal harem and the games and deadly intrigues that take place between the women within it, and concentrates especially on Celia Lamprey, the abductee, who catches the Sultan's eye, and Paul Pindar, a diplomat and businessman, Celia's former fiancée, who is attached to a British delegation seeking to establish relations between the Sultan and the Elizabethan court.

While some dual-zone novels appear very contrived, Katie Hickman's works effortlessly well, and the denouement of both stories is poignant and satisfying.

The Aviary Gate is a fascinating study of human emotion and intrigue, as well as providing an all too real insight into what went on behind the harem walls of history's greatest Islamic empire.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh