

Alive and Well

Suspended Sentences

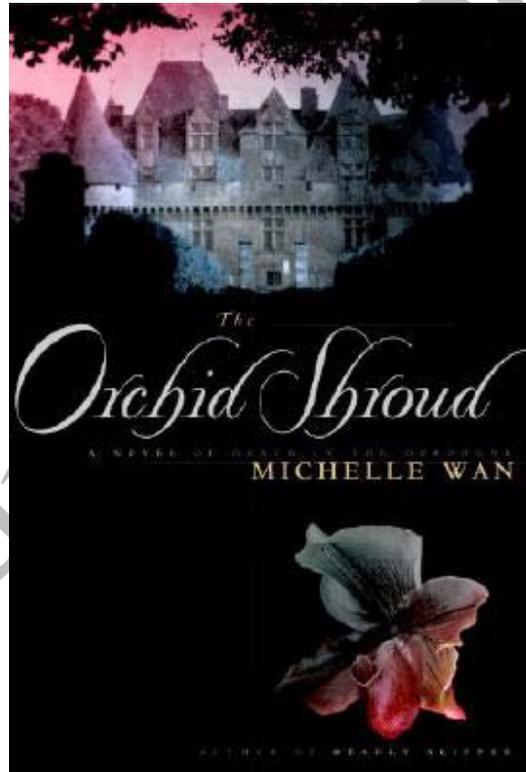
by Jim Napier

As I have noted in recent columns, the genre of crime and mystery fiction is alive and well, and undergoing constant refinement and sophistication. Although the novels of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie remain classics in their own right, many readers today are no longer satisfied by two-dimensional characters that sometimes seem lifted off the pages of the comics, or by plots that, for all their cunning, seem a mere rehash of the body in the library.

Enter, then, the best of the current generation of mystery writers, who combine rounded characters with fresh plots, delivered in original settings, and capped off with an unexpected twist at the end. Such is the case with this week's pick, Canadian author Michelle Wan.

Michelle Wan

Michelle Wan was born in Kunming, China, in the middle of an air raid, and grew up in India. She has travelled extensively, living in England, France, Ethiopia, and Brazil. Together with her husband, a tropical horticulturalist, Michelle visits the Dordogne region of France annually, so they can catalog and photograph the wild orchids there. With their dogs Downtown Max and Quel Jazz, Michelle and her husband currently live in Guelph, Ontario.



The Orchid Shroud (Doubleday Canada, 2006)

Accompanied by her horticulturalist partner, Julian Woods, Mara Dunn, a French-Canadian decorator, has returned to the Dordogne region of southwestern France, to indulge in their shared passion for the region and its exotic flora. Unable to resist a commission from family patriarch Christophe de Bonfond, to re-do a wing of Aurillac Manor, Mara sets out to renovate the 500-year-old ancestral family home. In the midst of demolition, however, a grisly secret is

revealed: the mummified remains of an infant, wrapped in a shroud, are found within an ancient wall. Forensics reveals that the child had been violently murdered sometime between 1860 and 1914. It seems clear, then, that the perpetrator is long dead.

But the local populace refuses to let the matter rest, and it is not long before rumours abound. Was the infant concealed in the wall the illegitimate offspring of a liaison between a de Bonfond and a family servant? Perhaps the child was legitimate, killed to thwart his claim to the family's considerable fortune? The timing could not be worse for the aristocratic Christophe: he is about to publish a history of his family, timed to coincide with the launching of a winery on the grounds of the estate. Desperate to put an end to these rumours, Christophe hires a local geneologist to research the family tree. But when the researcher turns up dead, Mara, who had visited him the previous night, is accused of killing him. With a suspect at hand, Mara realizes that the police are disinclined to look further afield; it is up to her, then — aided by Julian — to clear herself, and that involves solving two murders, one a hundred years old.

Were these the only elements of *The Orchid Shroud*, they could certainly sustain the novel. But Wan introduces multiple layers of complexity to challenge and engage the reader. The body of the child had been wrapped in a shroud embroidered with the image of a species of orchid so rare as to be mythological. Mara's partner Julian, compiling what he hopes will be the definitive study of orchids in the region, is obsessed by the possibility that a hitherto unknown species of the plant may still exist, almost literally at his feet. He drags Mara off in search of the

illusive orchid. Added to the mix, a ferocious beast seems to be prowling the neighboring woods, savagely attacking animals and even local residents. Only the latest in a series of such killings stretching back for two centuries, it is not long before the villagers are speaking of werewolves, and tying the deaths to Aurillac Manor. When Christophe suddenly disappears in the wake of the geneologist's murder, and when Mara learns that he has vanished before, coinciding with the phases of the full moon, even she is compelled to consider that the solution to these horrific events may lie in the realm of the supernatural. What Mara discovers will test her core beliefs, and will put her life, and those of others around her, in mortal jeopardy.

A rich and satisfying read

A complex, multilayered work, *The Orchid Shroud* is a worthy sequel to *Deadly Slipper*, Wan's debut novel. It weaves together events from the centuries-old past with those of the Second World War and contemporary happenings in an engrossing tale of superstition, greed, obsession and fear. Michelle Wan is a bright new face on the literary landscape, and *The Orchid Shroud* is a rich and satisfying read, refreshing in its originality. Her appearance bodes well for the future of mystery and crime fiction.

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