

The Past at Work

Linda Rogers gets historical

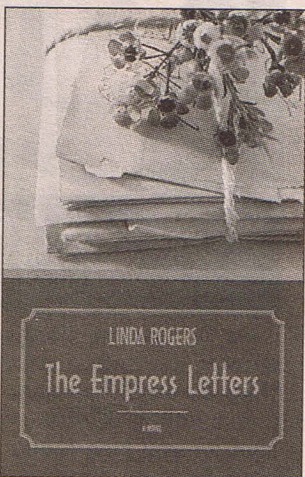
What is it about books that take place in your home town—especially books that take place in the past? It's not that I don't love my city; it's just that I don't expect to encounter it in fiction. Victoria is real, and very here-and-now. But set your historical fiction in it, and I'm expecting cheap and cheesy. Like chick lit, or that horrible Hugh Jackson movie where he teleports from the past into New York and rides a horse through apartment buildings.

All this to say that I picked up Linda Rogers' latest work, *The Empress Letters* (Cormorant, 269 pages, \$22.95), with more than a tad of skepticism. I admit I was a Rogers novice, and the jacket description of rich Oak Bay families and a child named "Precious" did little to intrigue me.

Thank god for editors and deadlines, though, because once I picked *Empress* up, I had a hard time putting it down.

Empress is a collection of letters written by Poppy von Stronheim Mandeville (we'll call her Poppy for short) to her young daughter, Precious. The child is lost in China, and Poppy is crossing the Pacific to find her. Her letters are a way of revealing the truth of Precious's parents, and all the family secrets that have shaped her life.

Through Poppy's recount of her own childhood and family history, Rogers creates a vivid Victoria I barely knew existed: rich Oak Bay homes with underground tunnels and bootlegging businesses; seedy Chinatown with mysterious alleys and hidden opium dens; picnics on the Gorge and parties at Hatley Castle; scores of indentured Chinese servants attempting to support their families in China. It's a world where the privileged and the poor co-exist, accepting their roles without question.



***The Empress Letters* book launch**

3-5 pm Sunday, June 3
Point Ellice House,
2616 Pleasant
380-6506

Empress explores the boundaries of family and friendship through one imaginative and passionate woman's eyes. It follows her struggle to find and hold onto the love of her mother, and her tenuous relationships with her "social inferiors" in a highly racist and classist time.

Incorporated into the tale are characters that any local will appreciate. Poppy's painting teacher is Emily Carr, a bristly woman who avoids bathing and breeds dogs in James Bay. The Butchart family starts cultivating their garden, and Dola Dunsmuir is suspected to be having an affair with the Hollywood celebrity Tallulah Bankhead. These characters are a fun and welcome addition to Poppy's story.

This is an intriguing and poetic novel that reveals an important part of our city's past. Instead of being distracted by the local references and characters, *The Empress Letters* enriched my view of Victoria and my appreciation for its history.

—Sarah Gignac