



THE TOP SHELF

Book Reviews

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Imperial Lady: A Fantasy of Han China, by Andre Norton and Susan Shwartz ((Tor Books, \$3.95 - paperback), based on the life of a real historical princess of the Han dynasty in China, is a remarkable book.

Lady Silver Snow, daughter of a disgraced noble, is selected to become one of the multitude of concubines of the Son of Heaven -- the Emperor of China himself. Raised in exile on the borders of her homeland, she has been educated in many ways normally closed to women -- and when the summons comes to court she is readier than any other woman for the chance to redeem her father's honor -- and to survive.

Court intrigue, however, is not her strong point, and Silver Snow, who wins the respect of her escort through her hunting skills (almost unheard of for a woman) and her courage, is warned by them to be wary and careful in the Emperor's domain. She goes toward what will undoubtedly be a form of lifelong imprisonment with head held high.

She does have her maid for company -- Willow, a red-haired woman (red hair is considered extremely unlucky, and feared) thought to be a shapechanger with the fox as her other form. Willow's loyalty and devotion to Silver Snow will stand her in good stead through her ordeal, although the rumors that fly about Willow's origins and supernatural powers cause their own share of trouble.

When Silver Snow does fall victim to the spite of a highly placed court eunuch, only her own courage and Willow's devotion keep her going as she is banished to a solitary domain in the Cold Palace.

Five hundred concubines have been chosen for the Emperor,

Yen-shou, who vents his spleen by painting her as ugly.

Silver Snow is banished on the basis of the portrait, and later selected by the Emperor, sight unseen, as a bride for the *shan-yu* of the Hsiung-an, the nomad Huns who rode the steppe and threatened China itself. The gift of a bride is to cement an alliance between the two peoples, and of all candidates Silver Snow is the best suited -- because her father was once the prisoner of the very man the Emperor now seeks to wed her to, and she is far from ignorant of their ways. She can ride and hunt, like their women; she even speaks their language.

When she is brought before the Son of Heaven for the formal betrothal, the Emperor is shocked to find that Silver Snow bears no resemblance to the spiteful portrait painted of her by his eunuch; she is instead the very image of his dead lady, his beloved First Concubine. And when he demands to know how this has happened, only Silver Snow has the courage to answer him.

And even though the Emperor is suddenly willing to risk war with the Hsiung-nu in order to keep her by his side, Silver Snow's own sense of honor will not permit it. She goes as bride to the *shan-yu*, and there must wage a different battle altogether -- against the former first wife of the *shan-yu*, who has powers beyond those of mortal women.

But perhaps not beyond those of her devoted maid Willow. . . .

This is a fascinating tale, with the richness of Han China and the strangeness of the nomad life well told and delightfully come to life. Norton and Shwartz are fine, skilled writers, experts in their subject, and