

Book Review

Jamesland a Delightful Visit

By ELAINE HATFIELD

A FEW YEARS AGO, my husband Richard L. Rapson, an American historian, and I were having breakfast with the great Henry James biographer, Leon Edel, and his younger brother, Abe, a philosopher at the University of Pennsylvania. We'd invited them to meet Tim Naftali, who'd just finished a book called *One Hell of a Gamble*, in which he discussed (among other things), the complex relationship that had existed between the brothers Fidel and Raúl Castro at the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion. As breakfast progressed, all these friends were arguing and talking at once. They discoursed about complex sibling relationships, particularly those of the Castro and the James brothers. It became thoroughly clear that the real dispute was between Leon and Abe. The words might be about Fidel and Raúl, Henry and William, but the music was all about Abe and Leon. It was all delicious, complicated, grand opera.

Michelle Hueven's wonderful book, *Jamesland*, possesses the same dizzying whirl of cosmic delight, coincidence, and generational confusions and entanglements.

The thoroughly modern heroine, Alice Black, is awakened at 2:00 am by a crashing sound. Tiptoeing downstairs to investigate, she comes upon two spectres, her great-aunt Kate, a dotty spinster who currently resides in a nursing home, and a wild deer. *Dream? Reality? Hallucination?* Kate can't tell.

All her life, Alice (the great-great-granddaughter of philosopher and psychologist William James) has fiercely fought against getting swept into "Jamesland" — her term for the compelling world of William James. Yet, now, Kate's attempt to unravel the mystery of the midnight visitation leads her inexorably into that forbidden world. She consults Aunt Kate, who has spent the last 25 years crafting a Jamesian novel. So caught up in the world of 1890 is Aunt Kate, that our Alice is generally addressed as if she were Alice James (William James' mother), Alice James (his sister), or Alice Gibbens James (his wife). Rarely is she accorded the dignity of being herself.

Alice's life hasn't been going well. At 33, she's living alone in Aunt Kate's house and weed-filled garden, tending bar, and carrying on an on-again-off-again affair with Nick Lawton, the alcoholic husband of a movie star.

Alice's detective work introduces her to a delightful cast of characters — people best viewed through the William Jamesian prism of spiritualism, ghosts, and the paranormal. Hueven's characters are fascinating, witty, and original. There's Reverend Helen Hartland, a Unitarian Universalist minister, and a James admirer with a belief in ... well, any number of things. There's Pete Ross, a sweet but twitchy chef teetering on the brink of insanity. He can't resist skewering Alice and her friends with simple truths they don't wish to hear. Shirley is a drag queen who inhabits the Bread Basket, where Pete works.

When Helen, who has befriended Alice, finds Alice a job transcribing tapes for a scholar investigating psychics who claim to be in direct communication with William James, Alice finds herself drawn completely into the taboo world of Jamesland. Soon she is visiting her Aunt Kate, sneaking pages from the Jamesland novel out of her aunt's wastebasket, then traveling to interview psychics, so she can feast on James' latest pronouncements from beyond the grave.

Jamesland is a delightful and funny book. Readers will learn a great deal about William James and his spiritualistic encounters, as well as spend time with a delightful cast of Jamesian characters, who in the end find wisdom in a world part magical, part realistic, part dream, part reality — a world filled with hope ... in a limited sort of way.



JAMESLAND
By Michelle Hueven
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