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Victorian's Secret

In this fantasy-thriller, a young woman risks her life to investigate an erotic cult of sinister doctors.

Reviewed by Kevin Allman
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THE GLASS BOOKS OF THE DREAM EATERS

A Novel

By Gordon Dahlquist

Bantam. 760 pp. \$26

Many pages into his new novel, *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters*, Gordon Dahlquist hits on a singular image: a woman on a table in a makeshift operating theater, rubber hoses draining and replacing her fluids while a surgeon-chemist seems about to transplant a blue glass book into her limp body. The scene is Jules Verne and "The Bride of Frankenstein" all in one, and it's fantastic.

Unfortunately, this comes well into *The Glass Books*, a wordy brick that's epic in length if not in scale. Ponderously ornate -- Dahlquist never met a description that he couldn't sink his teeth into and then worry to shreds -- it's a kinky, atmospheric look at Victorian England that all too often moves like a sullen coach through one of the author's many, many London fogs.

The Glass Books begins with a jilting: A young woman, Celeste Temple, receives a letter from her betrothed, Roger Bascombe, terminating their engagement in the terse, dry language of a lawyer. After a brief bout with tears, Miss Temple abandons her retinue, picks up her reticule and begins to follow her wayward fiancé -- not in hope of changing his mind, but determined to get to the bottom of his perfidy. Her search leads her to a masquerade ball at a mysterious English manor belonging to a Lord Vandaariff, and to a group of sinister aristocrats (including her fiancé) who have gathered in an operating theater to watch zombified young women get put through exhibitionist sexual routines. Before long, Miss Temple has been seized by bad guys and is embroiled in one of the book's many hair-breadth, hare-brained captures and ingenious escapes, and there are more of those than in all of "Batman."

Meanwhile, two others get caught up in the murky doings at Lord Vandaariff's: "Cardinal" Chang, a near-blind assassin hired to kill a decorated colonel at the masquerade ball, and Dr. Abelard Svenson, who is treating (and running interference for) a dissolute young prince named Karl-Horst von Maasmärck. The three finally join forces, "Wizard of Oz" style, to investigate the skullduggery, and their quest leads them to a quasi-scientific process called, well, the Process, which seems to be a mix of alchemy, quackery, mesmerism, voodoo and sex slavery, all bound up with secrecy and the ultimate goal of world domination. Holy Tom Cruise!

The Glass Books is a thick cavalcade of characters and extended chases, which end up being more enervating than exciting -- who knew that feverish action could move so slowly? At half its size, *Glass Books* might carry along at a nice clip, but Dahlquist, a playwright making his fiction debut, seems to be indulging a descriptive itch he could never scratch through stage dialogue; every scene, every conversation, is explicated to dust.

Dahlquist can conjure nifty dreamlike images, such as a mystery train filled with passengers dressed for a Venetian *bal masque* and small glass calling cards capable of broadcasting images, like Queen Victoria's own little video iPod. But even readers with a taste for both Victorian thriller and fin de siècle

science fiction are likely to cry uncle when force-fed passages such as: "In short order she had learned -- for her aunt followed the city's gossip with an evangelical fervor -- the owner of Harschmort, the occasion of the masked ball, the reputations of Prince Karl-Horst and his bride (wretched and unsullied, respectively), and what she could about the various other names she had heard: Xonck, Lacquer-Sforza, d'Orkancz, Crabbé, Trapping, and Aspiche."

There's no shortage of imagination here, just a failure of self-control and a fondness for windy speeches. When Miss Temple creaks open a door, unsure what lies beyond, it's not at all clear that Dahlquist is sure either, until he comes up with the next sentence; much of the narration feels like thinking out loud. One's tolerance for this brand of fabulism is directly proportionate to the pleasure one takes in the childhood question "And then what happened?," where the listener cares less for the particulars of the story than in making sure Daddy never reaches the words "happily ever after."

At its heart, *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters* is less a novel than it is hundreds of pages of ornament piled on a rickety piece of storytelling. It may appeal to a certain subset of Anne Rice fans: the ones who liked the ritualized kinky-boots action of her A.N. Roquelaure erotic novels and the ultra-rococo style of her Vampire series. Others will have slammed shut *The Glass Books* well before Miss Temple discovers her true identity and calling, having long been knocked out by Dahlquist's hundredth application of Lacquer-Sforza.

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