



Graveyard Dust

Barbara Hambly

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Bestselling author Barbara Hambly's **A Free Man of Color** and **Fever Season** established Benjamin January as one of mystery's most exciting heroes. Now he returns in a powerful new novel, a sensual mosaic of old New Orleans, where cultures clash and murder can hover around every darkened corner....

It is St. John's Eve in the summer of 1834 when Benjamin January--Creole physician and music teacher--is shattered by the news that his sister has been arrested for murder. The Guards have only a shadow of a case against her. But Olympe--mystical and rebellious--is a woman of color, whose chance for justice is slim.

As Benjamin probes the allegation, he is targeted by a new threat: graveyard dust sprinkled at his door, whispering of a voodoo death curse. Now, to save Olympe's life--and his own--Benjamin knows he must glean information wherever he can find it. For in the heavy darkness of New Orleans, the truth is what you make it, and justice can disappear with the night's warm breeze as easy as graveyard dust....

Graveyard Dust Details

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Bonnie says

Another series I'm hooked on. This is the third, though I haven't read the first two. Set in New Orleans of the mid-1800s, an era and area I know little about, I loved how much I learned. The atmosphere is rather spooky, since the life of the free blacks was a precarious one, plus there's a fair amount of voodoo taking place. This was a very riveting book, that was hard to put down.

Heather D-G says

This third entry in the atmospheric series finds free-man-of-color Benjamin January scrambling to clear his voodooienne sister Olympe from a charge of murder. When nineteen-year-old Isaak goes missing, it isn't long before his opium-addict brother turns up with a fantastic tale of kidnapping and poison -- but no body. The setting is 1830's New Orleans in the summer, and the city is stewing in its own juices; lack of a sewage system and copious mosquitoes (thanks to the city's humid, swampy location) ensure that sicknesses like cholera and yellow fever are ever-present threats.

Benjamin January has been back in New Orleans for less than two years, following the death of his wife in Paris. He's a surgeon by training, a musician by inclination -- and the reluctance of creole society to accept of physician who's skin so closely resembles that of the slaves that work the sugar-cane plantations.

His efforts to clear his sister's name and free her from prison will bring him into close contact with Voodoo and the beliefs and fears of his childhood.

The series seems to hit its stride with this entry, which proceeds seamlessly from start to finish, drawing us along without letting our attention wander. Favorite side-characters from the first two books are present as well, continuing to develop their own stories. Highly recommended.

sage says

5 stars for atmosphere, 1 star for plot. Which is to say the five or seven wandering subplots that are supposed to link up don't. Disability tag for "Hollywood" disability, wherein characters with major conditions manage the physically impossible in return for narrative payoff.

David Thalenberg says

A most compelling storyteller

Hannah is at peak form in these novels. Meticulously researched and beautifully written, this is a character driven book. And there are few characters as strong as Benjamin January. Free black man, many talented, brilliant and feeling, he lives in the mind of the reader.

Thank you, Ms. Hambly, for another great book.

Dagny says

Another superb read by Barbara Hambly. In addition to the expected mystery and suspense, *Graveyard Dust* explores a portion of the Voodoo heritage of New Orleans. With her background and study as an historian, Hambly is able to evoke the ambience of New Orleans in the 1830s and the role Voodoo played in the lives of some of its residents.

Jamie Collins says

I continue to enjoy this mystery series, set in New Orleans in the early 1800's. I love Hambly's atmospheric prose, and even her outrageous endings are growing on me. Although to my relief, this ending, while dark, isn't as gruesome as that of the previous book - I was afraid she was going to try to top it.

Benjamin January is a devout Catholic, and so disapproves of his sister's practice of voodoo, but he comes to her aid when she's accused of selling poison to a woman for the purpose of murdering her husband.

I suspect this third entry in the series wouldn't make a good standalone novel, which suits me well enough. I realize that there's a delicate balance between annoying familiar readers and alienating new ones, but I read so many series where the author spends 50 pages of every book rehashing the events of earlier books, so it was a pleasure to have familiar characters and a minimum of repetition. I'm looking forward to the next book.

Rachel Brown says

Benjamin January # 3! This one was way less grim than *Fever Season*. I realize that's easy to say, so I will give it an independent grimness rating.

Grimness of content: Medium. Racism and other isms, slavery, murder; child abuse is discussed but not shown.

Grimness of tone: Low. The subtitle is "a novel of suspense" and that accurately describes the tone. It's a very atmospheric mystery with some excellent action and really great characters. I loved everyone in this book, except for the villains and racists, obviously. Also, it contains a number of fun tropes, including hurt-comfort, creepy pottery, courtroom drama, spirit possession, and dodging alligators in the bayou. Plus Marie Laveau. The plot is very well-constructed and entertaining. And there's some very funny banter, plus a number of dramatic, alarming, and/or hilarious courtroom scenes.

Benjamin January is a devout Catholic and regularly prays for the soul of his sister Olympe, a voodoo practitioner. When Olympe is railroaded into jail for poisoning a man, mostly due to prejudice against voodoo, Ben gets on the case.

I really enjoyed the portrayal of voodoo. Hambly has an afterword discussing her research (she's a historian) and interviews with current practitioners where she gives a sense of how varied the practice and history is-- as is the case in any religion. From Ben's outsider/insider perspective, it's simultaneously alien and disturbing, familiar and enticing. It was a great way to convey how any religion is sustaining and ordinary

for its followers, and exotic and weird to outsiders who don't understand it. Marie Laveau is one of my favorite characters in the series, and she naturally has a big part in this.

For the first time, supernatural forces appear as a (possibly) real force. The vivid scenes of spirit possession can be interpreted as simply the power of belief, but they make more sense if the Loa are objectively real. I liked the delicate balance of deniability at play through the whole book.

Since my favorite thing about this series is the characters, I'll do a check-in. Augustus Mayerling, the sword master who was one of my favorites from the first book, re-appears. Poor Hannibal is so sick with consumption that it was a relief to know while reading that he's still alive ten books later-- he spends most of the book either in bed or helping Ben with various tasks while trying not to pass out. (Rose makes some satisfying appearances, though I wish she was in the story more. Ben's awful mother Livia is still hilariously, deliciously catty. Olympe and her family have nice big roles-- I really like her, her husband, and her son Gabriel. And Ben has a really satisfying character arc.

Geordie says

As always, Hambly's prose is intense and amazingly colorful. However, the plot of 'Graveyard Dust' is weaker than the previous books in the series. The direction seems to be meandering, and the glut of characters melt together - there are two (or three?) ruthlessly controlling mothers - they should have been blindingly distinct, one was former French aristocracy, the other was an African-American who had previously been a mistress, but I was frequently confusing them. Benjamin picks up leads seemingly at random, and finds the true villain by a leap of logic that I was unable to follow. Hambly also went overboard on making the tone grim and bleak. There is certainly a lot of serious and tragic subject matter, but sometimes it was so heavy it felt intentional, like words and images were chosen to horrify the reader, instead of natural.

It's still a good book; good writing, good characters. I'm still planning to read book 4, I just hope that it will flow better than this one.

Sharon says

I'm working my way through the entire Benjamin January series; this is the third one.

In this book, January's sister, Olympe, stands accused of murder. A free woman of color's husband has disappeared, and the whispers are that Olympe was paid to poison him. Because she's a voodooienne, the populace is willing to believe it despite any evidence to the contrary.

January and his unlikely compatriot, American police lieutenant Abishag Shaw, decide that they are going to look deeper into the matter. In the meanwhile, Olympe waits in the jail at the Cabildo ... and more people are dying or disappearing. When Marie Laveau makes it clear that she can assist in the investigation, January knows there is more to it than meets the eye.

This series of historical mysteries is quite well-researched, giving the readers a look at Jacksonian-era New Orleans that no other fiction writer I've found has provided. The class distinctions are dealt with frankly, and

even the fashion notes are spot-on (like Benjamin January, I think the fashion in ladies' sleeves at the time is horrid).

Highly recommended for intelligent, well-developed mysteries and more than a smattering of historical information.

Catherine says

Read this while on vacation in New Orleans and found that it added a fascinating level of historical detail to the trip. Well written and intense, with lots of interesting cultural detail - best of the Benjamin January novels that I've read to date. I also appreciate the effort that Hambly makes to create an authentic feel to 1830s New Orleans and the tension between the Americans and the French as well as enslaved people of African descent, freedmen and freemen.
Recommended.

Lirazel says

4.5 stars

Sandra says

3.5 really. I found this one harder to follow than the two previous ones. Still quite good, though. But I need a break from the threat of slavery and death. Not to mention the filth of the 1830's in New Orleans.

Julie says

You wouldn't think a book series that makes my flesh crawl would be as enjoyable as this is, but it is. It makes New Orleans sound like a bug-infested, plague-ridden hellhole filled with murderers, procurers, slavers, and whores, and apparently I like that.

Kim says

New Orleans in the 1830s is complicated and nuanced, and Benjamin January lives at the intersections of converging and competing cultures, none of which is as simple as white and black. This 3rd book in the series delves into the world of voodoo, described in the Author's Note as "a complex interlocking of ancestor worship, reverence for the spirits of nature, and an overarching belief in a single deity who works through the various spirits - the loa or lwa - to aid humankind. The thousands of men and women who were kidnapped and enslaved by their tribal enemies, and sold to the white, carried with them only what they had in their minds and in their hearts: skill at their trades, love of family, a rich heritage of music, and stories of animals and spirits." (The Author's Note is as fascinating, if much, much shorter, as the story.)

Hambly's characters are multifaceted and convey the complexity of human nature throughout, and her portrait of Voodooienne Marie Laveau is particularly intriguing. "He understood then how she came to know everything, to fit all things together in a great mosaic of intelligence. She listened, and she remembered, and she cared."

I also particularly appreciated the irony in a courtroom scene where lawyers argue over whether the case will be heard in English or French (the French New Orleans now a part of the United States): "'We true citizens of the City of New Orleans,' retorted Vilhardouin, in French, 'were sold to the United States against our will and without being consulted in the matter --' 'Welcome to our ranks,' muttered January dourly."

Chris says

If you like Star Wars, you need to read the afterword of this mystery. If Fever Season was a weakfish follow up, this book brings the series back. Loved characters return, and there is a remark about a marriage. It's nice to see the return of Rose and the slow development of a relationship.

What is particularly enjoyable and outstanding about this book is January's family. He and his sister Olympe represent what their mother was as opposed to his half sister who represents at least to his mother's eyes, what she currently is. Tied up into this family are the effects of racism and slavery as well as being what people do not think you should be. January a doctor who really cannot practice and reverts back to piano playing, his sister who is free or is she, his mother who might be more human than she lets on. Additionally, there is finer detail here, more sure touches than in the second one.
