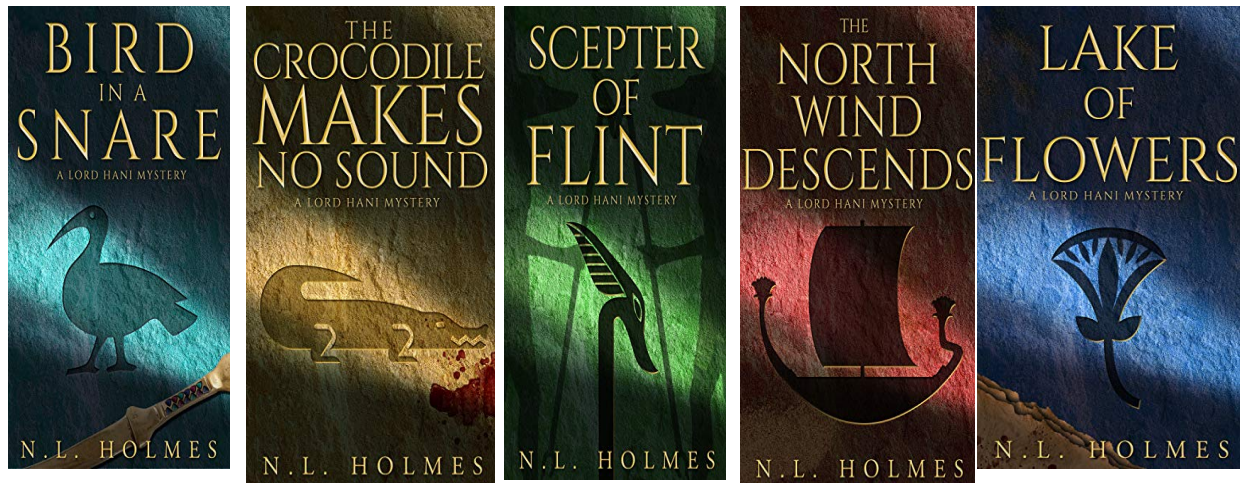


Nun-Turned-Archaeologist Pens Two Lively Historical Novel Series Set In Ancient Egypt, Taking Us Behind The Scenes of a Kingdom With Parallels To Today's America



What kind of books would a nun-turned-archaeologist write?

Answer: Two intriguing series, both powerful historical fiction set in the fascinating period of Egyptian rule some 3,300 years ago.

The Lord Hani Mysteries and *The Empire at Twilight* series rely on author N.L. Holmes' extensive knowledge of this period in ancient Egypt and her vivid imagination to dig up the past and present a relevant, page-turning set of mysteries. They capture the attention of those who are curious about what happened behind-the-scenes of one of the greatest dynasties. Her books explore the explosive dynamics of family and power behind the kingdom, sharing adventurous stories through provocative protagonists.

“These books explore a time and people that reveal some similarities to today’s time of political unrest and cultural change,” says Holmes. Indeed, she insightfully understands human nature and how that drives motives and actions to create extraordinary stories.

Holmes will share the following in an interview:

- Why she left the convent after two decades to be an archaeologist and professor for 25 years.
- How historical fictions helps us gain an appreciation of history and a greater perspective of today.
- Why the kingdom of the man who was King Tut’s father is so interesting.
- What happens when there is great cultural, religious and political change in a short period of time.
- What we learn from studying the dynamics between a totalitarian regime and its servants.
- What she discovered on archaeological digs in Greece and Israel.
- The challenges and rewards of bringing ancient history authentically to life today.

“These books bring to life a long-gone era that has relevance to today’s world,” says Holmes. Those days – and these books – possess some powerful elements, including: mysterious political assassinations, shocking affairs with heads of state, dramatic family maneuverings, plots for rebellion and resistance.”

The Lord Hani Mysteries take place during the reign of ancient Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten (1353-1336 BC). “His reign,” says Holmes, “was quite unusual and challenged the norms of his day.”

“Akhenaten is noted for abandoning Egypt's traditional polytheistic religion and introducing Atenism, worship centered on Aten,” says Wikipedia. “The view of Egyptologists differ whether Atenism should be considered as absolute monotheism, or whether it was monolatry, syncretism, or henotheism. This culture shift away from traditional religion was not widely accepted. After his death, Akhenaten's monuments were dismantled and hidden, his statues were destroyed, and his name excluded from lists of rulers compiled by later pharaohs. Traditional religious practice was gradually restored, notably under his close successor Tutankhamun, who changed his name from Tutankhaten early in his reign. When some dozen years later rulers without clear rights of succession from the Eighteenth Dynasty founded a new dynasty, they discredited Akhenaten and his immediate successors, referring to Akhenaten himself as "the enemy" or "that criminal" in archival records.

“Akhenaten was all but lost to history until the late 19th century discovery of Amarna, or Akhetaten, the new capital city he built for the worship of Aten.^[18] Furthermore, in 1907, a mummy that could be Akhenaten's was unearthed from the tomb KV55 in the Valley of the Kings by Edward R. Ayrton. Genetic testing has determined that the man buried in KV55 was Tutankhamun's father,^[19] but its identification as Akhenaten has since been questioned.

“Akhenaten's rediscovery and Flinders Petrie's early excavations at Amarna sparked great public interest in the pharaoh and his queen Nefertiti. He has been described as "enigmatic," "mysterious," "revolutionary," "the greatest idealist of the world," and "the first individual in history," but also as a "heretic," "fanatic," "possibly insane," and "mad.”

“*The Lord Hani Mysteries* gives the reader a chance to take a vacation to a fabulous place and glimpse the lives of the ‘beautiful people’ of yore,” says Holmes. “And we can all use a vacation right now.”

Contact: N.L. Holmes 813-980-1161 nlholmesbooks@gmail.com

Rave Reviews

“The central mystery (*Bird in a Snare*) contains abundant twists, which lead to a satisfying and surprising conclusion. A fine mystery tale that explores the relatable troubles of a conflicted investigator.”

--Kirkus Reviews

“Hani and Maya are instantly likeable protagonists, and there are enough twists, turns, and court intrigues to satisfy all lovers of historical mysteries. Holmes’ writing is simultaneously colorful and informative, blending vivid depictions of Hani’s surroundings with subtle cultural histories presented mostly without judgment. Readers will find it hard to put down this tale of ancient intrigue.”

--Publishers Weekly Booklife Review

“This suspenseful (*Bird in a Snare*) and illuminating mystery concludes with a surprising twist, leaving readers wanting more from Hani and his misadventures. An archeologist by training, Holmes uses evocative language and seamlessly weaves in minute details about Egyptian social hierarchies, religious beliefs, family dynamics, material culture and politics. Readers will find themselves illuminated by their stay in this heady — if treacherous — realm.”

--Book Trib

“This book is part of a series, but it can be read as a standalone. Its action is set during a contentious time in Egyptian history, when changes in regime and state religion led to widespread unemployment, disrepair, and disaffection. Abandoned houses stand where important priests and vassals once lived, and angry people use the slightest provocation as an excuse to take out their frustrations on others. This is a perfect setting for a mystery series. ... *The Crocodile Makes No Sound* is a slow-burning historical mystery set in the beautiful, dangerous world of ancient Egypt.”

--Foreword Clarion Reviews

“The author’s use of avian imagery throughout (*Bird in a Snare*) creates a subtle symbolic thread that inserts an additional layer to an already multi-tapestried read. ... This is a highly compelling start to what could be a wildly successful mystery series.”

--BlueInk Review

“I am thoroughly impressed!.. With completely relatable characters and one on the most genuine familial relationship I have seen, *Bird in a Snare* is sure to draw the reader into Lord Hani’s world as he battles within himself, with his family, and with his king. 5 stars!

--Online Book Club

“The Lightning Horse is an action-packed, exciting opener for the Empire at Twilight series. Holmes reimagines the historical figures and legacies from the Hittite Empire to create an adventurous novel that reader of all ages will enjoy.”

--Book Review Directory

“Another stellar volume in the Lord Hani Mysteries collection... Having been wowed by the sensual and immersive introduction to ancient Egypt from book one, it was wonderful to step back into Hani’s world.... I would highly recommend *The Crocodile Makes No Sound* for fans of Lord Hani who want to fall into these amazing political thriller mysteries of the ancient world. 5 stars.”

--Readers’ Favorite Official Review

“ A satisfying mystery in a vividly realized historical setting. (*The Crocodile Makes no Sound*)”

--Kirkus Reviews

N. L. Holmes

Biography



N.L. Holmes is a prolific novelist embarking on another significant career phase. Prior to taking up the power of writing and using this pen name, she was an accomplished archaeologist and teacher for 25 years. Early in her career she served as a nun for two decades. In between she was an artist and antiques dealer. Yes, she has lived an interesting life and the sum of her experiences informs and inspires her writings today.

Holmes, who earned her doctorate in Classical and Near Eastern Archaeology Studies from Bryn Mawr College despite an offer to attend Princeton, has excavated in Greece and Israel, and taught ancient history and humanities at Stockton University in N.J. and University of South Florida for many years. She also did archaeological artwork for excavations from Lebanon.

With nine published novels, Holmes is the creator of *The Lord Hani Mysteries*. The inspiration for her Bronze Age novels came with an assignment she gave to her students one day: Here are the only documents we have telling us about royal divorce in Ugarit in the 13th century. How much can we say about what happened? She notes: “It quickly became apparent that almost anything we might come up with was as much fiction as historiography!”

She also penned *The Empire At Twilight* series, historical fiction set in 13th century C.B. during the Hittite Empire.

Born and raised in Fort Worth, Texas, she attended The University of Texas in the honors program but dropped out midway to enter into the antiques business. Two years later, she entered the Discalced Carmelite convent in Texas. She left the convent 20 years later and returns to school to get her B.A. in Classical and Near Eastern Archaeology.

Holmes resides with her husband, three cats, and a dog. They split their time between Tampa, Florida and northern France, where she gardens, weaves, and plays the violin. They have an adult son. For more information, please consult www.nlholmes.com.

N. L. Holmes

Q & A

The Lord Hani Mysteries

- 1. What inspired you to pen a mystery series of five books set in 14th century Egypt, taking us behind the powerful political intrigue and family drama of the kingdom?** I taught a class on Ancient Egypt for years, and it was very popular, so I knew Egypt had a fan base. To me and to many students, the so-called Amarna Period, the reign of Akhenaten and his immediate successors was fascinating, both because of the idea of monotheism and because of the mystery that surrounds it. We don't even know who Akhenaten's successors were for sure, or how they were all related. There are interesting characters with plenty of unknown space for fiction to fill in.
- 2. How does historical fiction help us gain a great appreciation for history?** If the research is solid and one reads them critically, they can shed a human light on the past that dry dates and battles don't, especially on what we call social history: everyday life, mores, how religion interacts with daily life and the decisions people make. And, of course, that helps to interest people more in history in general (I'm sure seeing "The Egyptian" and other sword and sandal movies interested me in archaeology in early childhood). Of course, the author of historical fiction can't help but shade the characters a little. But don't think historians don't do the same thing! No human being sees the past without forming opinions.
- 3. Your series is based, in part, on a real but not-so-well-known historical figure, Lord Hani. What was he like in real life – and how did you portray him in your books?** We know nothing of Hani as a person, only that his name recurs repeatedly in the Amarna Letters; he was a trusted emissary over a period of years, but my character is essentially fictional. I have tried to observe the facts of Hani's real missions and add a few plausible fictional ones. I had just written some novels that had troubled or abrasive protagonists, and I wanted to be in the head of a good, sane person for a change: perceptive, compassionate, tolerant, upright, and fearless. He would have had to be to function successfully in that political climate and stay in favor under so many regimes.
- 4. Prior to becoming an archaeologist of 25 years, you had a very interesting career, beginning with two decades as a nun! Do tell how you went from making a vow to serving God to heeding the call of science?** The Discalced Carmelites are a very strict, contemplative order, and this was in the aftermath of Vatican II, so an essentially medieval way of life was struggling to come into the twentieth century. It was an experience that taught me a lot about human nature. I had not grown up as religious, so there was really no difficulty in emerging. A few things had changed—credit cards and computers were in—but I had no problem in rejoining the stream of my life "BC." For a brief moment, it seemed I might become a stained glass designer, but I had just enrolled at university again, so that's the path I chose: returning to archaeology, my first love.
- 5. You write about a kingdom that was under great fluctuation, where major religious reforms are introduced. Did that mirror what you felt like when you transitioned out of the church and into science?** My transition was personal; the rest of society was just going merrily along. In the Amarna Period, the whole of society was overturned overnight. The temples of various gods, especially Amen-Ra, employed tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of people who suddenly found themselves out of work and persecuted. The whole economy was eviscerated. Families were split up ideologically. Fortunately,

that's not like anything I've ever experienced. There was no brutal cut-off for me. Perhaps I was far too secular inside even in my convent days.

6. **You were also an antiques dealer. Why do we try to own history by collecting it? What attaches us to the past that these objects emulate?** I can only speak for myself here—a person who, since childhood, has been attracted to the old—but I think it gives us a sense of being part of the human continuum. Many Americans (not the hyphenated ones, perhaps) have had our roots cut off when our ancestors came to start over from scratch. My father wanted to establish for himself the sense of being a part of the “English country gentleman” tribe. I was more interested in thinking of all the hands a piece had passed through, of all the human lives it had touched. I think of all the previous owners as somehow being present in an old thing.
7. **What type of power dynamics do you explore in your books?** There are several, but the main one is that between a totalitarian government and its servants. Do you speak your mind and be destroyed, your family with you? Or do you keep your mouth shut and keep doing your job? Hani starts out with one answer and changes over time. His superior is a man who has been broken in rank and dishonored because he let himself fall afoul of the ruler. Hani's brother-in-law had no trouble answering the question: he was a fiery revolutionary from the start. There are other, smaller relationships, like turf wars between the police and the foreign service, between masters and slaves, and such.
8. **In your books there is a conscientious individual employed by a corrupt regime. And this story unfolds during a plague. Wait, are we living this story in real time in 2020?** Well you might ask! Human nature and nature in the broader sense never change, so we keep creating the same situations for ourselves. We're still knocked around by hurricanes and epidemics despite all our technology, so no wonder people of the past were. They didn't know what caused plague or how it was transmitted, but we don't seem to be doing much better with modern knowledge. Perhaps that's the value of looking at ancient responses: we can see where we might do so much better. As to issues of conscience, they're going to be different for everyone, but they'll always be present.
9. **Does history repeat itself?** The Teilhardian in me would rather think history is a spiral. We come around to the same point ever so often, but we're inching gradually upward. For sure, we see the same scenarios play out again and again. I think that's because human nature hasn't changed. We only have the same repertory of emotional responses, and we have to deal with the world out of that small arsenal. Intellectually? Society's world view influences one's thinking a lot, but again, no matter the causes one believes to be at work, we can only react in one of a few ways. I suppose those are our biological limitations.
10. **Tell us what it is like to go on a dig for riches and history.** I can't tell you what it is to go after riches, but history is always a thrilling quarry. The life in the field is often rough; colleagues form a bond that more solitary academics don't. That's a real joy—you make good friends and get to explore the country. But the reward for uncovering an ancient city is to learn more about how people lived, the struggles they faced. The most touching thing I think we ever found was a big pot broken into many pieces, with handprints all over it in the wet clay. Only one person in the history of the universe could have made those prints. It was so personal—as if they were reaching out to say, “Remember me.”
11. **You dug in some ancient lands, including Israel and Greece. How responsible do you feel for creating or correcting the historical record with the work that you performed?** While archaeology can certainly change our understanding of something we thought we knew, for the most part, it fills in our knowledge. For example, in Israel, we were looking at a hellenistic city (from the period of the Macchabees), seeking evidence whether or not the Jewish population adhered to their own laws or lived

as the Greeks did. Archaeology isn't medical research, yet I always felt I was part of something very important. Helping us understand ourselves better by looking at the past. You might compare it to psychoanalysis rather than hard medicine.

12. **How would you describe your writing style, one that some say is character-rich, high literary fiction?** My favorite living authors are people like Strout, Robinson, Erdrich. They write slow books, where nothing particular ever really happens. So my mysteries tend to unfold slowly and be solved by talking and thinking. For me, the most interesting part of any book is not the plot but the characters. The big conflicts are always those of conscience, trying to do the right thing. And, as a former artist, I love to *see* the world of the novel; description is a must. "Literary" isn't something I can ascribe to myself, but I do take the craft of writing very seriously. I swoon over those gorgeous, insightful passages in other people's books, and I want to write them too.
13. **The books are set during a period of time of great reform and chaos. How do those in power handle changes (threats?) to their power?** In an instant, the priests of Amen-Ra found the ground cut out beneath their feet—their wealth and prestige, their very belief system. Some probably accepted it, but others must have simmered and plotted, since almost as soon as Akhenaten died, his "reforms" were overturned. The whole period that followed his death must have been one of struggle between various members of his family. When the dust finally clears, the whole Amarna moment is excised from Egyptian history, Akhenaten and his successors cut out of the king lists as if they and their hour of glory never were.
14. **What makes 14th century Egypt such a fascinating time period in our history?** I think it's the mix of splendor and intellectual upheaval. Egypt was a very conservative society that had changed little for a thousand years... and then this unimaginable overturning of religion, artistic and social values. It seems part of today's social upheaval is the same: people confronted by inexorable change that disorients them and seems to threaten their sense of self, makes them feel helpless. So we can imagine the rancor and desperation of Egyptians faced with something similar. And religion played so much bigger a role in their lives than today, so the blow struck even deeper.
15. **What can we learn from studying life many worlds ago?** This is the fourteenth century BCE, so it's 3,300 years ago! But the answer is the same: change can't come that fast, even in an autocratic society. Even the most stable society, even one millennia old, can erupt into revolution. We learn what happens when a ruler or ruling body doesn't listen to anyone and unilaterally decrees things that affect everyone's lives (of course there wasn't even a pretense of democracy then). We learn the psychic turmoil of people forced to act against their consciences. But we also see how much difference one good, trustworthy voice can make.
16. **What challenges did you have to research and write this series?** I had to make decisions about what scenario to accept when all are up for grabs. As a novelist, I don't make the same choices as I would writing historiography. And there are many things we don't know—not just about events and personages, but about customs and elements of everyday life. I had to fill in the gaps plausibly. For example, we know what the Egyptians ate, but not how they prepared it. One of the most difficult things was to try to distill the messy muchness of foreign policy from all the letters exchanged into a coherent story without even knowing the chronological order of the letters.
17. **Without formal training as a writer, how did you become a novelist?** I have always been a voracious reader, and even as a child, I would write "novels" for fun. But once I began seriously to get into writing, I read every book on the subject I could find, I listened to podcasts, I went to conferences, I joined a writers' group. Then I wrote, which is the best exercise, and I listened to the comments of my

editors and tried to learn from them. It's a process that never ends. I still think of myself as a student; perhaps it's impostor syndrome. I sometimes tell myself, "Jeez, woman. You've written nine novels. Can you just admit you're a writer?"

18. **Your story takes place during a period of Egypt's history known as the New Kingdom, when the country becomes an empire. The reign of Akhenaten marked a nearly unimaginable overturning of values and customs millennia old. Was this a testimony to the absolute power of the king?**

Absolutely, if I may risk a pun. We can hardly imagine how powerful the king of Egypt was; the whole country and all its resources belonged to him personally, and other people gained wealth and prestige through his favor. He was answerable to no one. There was no separation of powers: the king was chief judge, high priest, war leader, and administrator. Akhenaten was able, by his decree, to put hundreds of thousands out of work and seize private property. He even chiseled people's names out of their own tombs if they contained the name of a god. His was absolutism at its most tone-deaf.

19. **Do your books, which bring the reader to interesting places, historical figures, and gods, bring people to see life through a lens that helps us understand our world today?** I'd like to think so. In Akhenaten's Egypt, human beings lived through a time not too unfamiliar to us. They had the same love for their families, the same fears and ambitions, the same desire to do right by their own consciences. That's why I haven't chosen to speak through the king or his household, but through more-or-less ordinary people. They were swept up unwillingly into a huge social movement. They must have asked, "Am I part of this? Where did the world I know go? Will it last forever?" I'm afraid our present moment asks all too many of the same questions.

20. **If a reader could only read one series of adventure, history, and mystery right now, why should it be yours?** It shows a world caught in many of the same disconcerting culture clashes as ours. People are struggling to make sense of a tidal wave on many fronts. Because it is a mystery, everything gets tied up at the end, and I think that sense of "right will prevail" is a comfort and a strength for us today. As is the fact that it is a decent, ordinary man who is able to hold things together. Given our curiosity about people's private lives and also about the more exotic and almost inexplicable splendor of Egypt, the Hani books should give the reader a chance to take a vacation to a fabulous place and glimpse the lives of the "beautiful people" of yore. And we all need a vacation right now.

The Lord Hani Mysteries

Lake of Flowers

Hani is set to investigate thefts from the king's household that turn out to be related to a more sinister attempt on the king's life. Meanwhile, witnesses to the crown prince's dodgy birth begin to die, and Hani fears for his daughter and her friend, who were also present. More secrets emerge about the prince's identity, and Hani finds himself caught between the government and the radical revolutionaries who want to restore Amen-Ra by civil war, among them the queen, whom Hani has sworn to serve. Can Hani reconcile his desire for peace with his devotion to the King of the Gods?

Bird in a Snare

When Hani, an Egyptian diplomat under Akhenaten, is sent to investigate the murder of a useful bandit leader in Syria, he encounters corruption, tangled relationships, and yet more murder. His investigation is complicated by the new king's religious reforms, which have struck Hani's own family to the core. Hani's mission is to amass enough evidence for his superiors to prosecute the wrongdoers despite the king's protection--but not just every superior can be trusted. And maybe not even the king!

The Crocodile Makes No Sound

Four years into Akhenaten's new regime, the dissatisfaction of those who practiced the old religion of Amen-Ra is growing. Hani, a diplomat already under the king's surveillance because of the disappearance of his firebrand Amen priest brother-in-law, gets drawn into an investigation for the Beloved Royal Wife, who is being blackmailed. Meanwhile, the new vassal king of A'amu, lodged at Hani's house until the king grants him an audience, is showing himself to be none too royal. Hani must walk the line between his oath to the king and his conscience.

Scepter of Flint

During the Great Jubilee of the Aten, a mysterious series of tomb robberies takes place, and witnesses begin to die. With plague ravaging the palace, where Hani's daughter is a physician, and Egypt's ally, Naharin, collapsing into the hands of a usurper, Hani must make sense of what is happening. And who in high places is his real enemy.

The North Wind Descends

Hani doesn't know what to make of it when the king starts honoring him, but he must still find the man who killed a foreign ambassador right under the roof of the Egyptian commissioner in Kumidi--a man whose past intersects bizarrely with Hani's. And then, the queen of the new coregent has a special task for him which may involve dragging Hani's nineteen-year-old daughter into court politics. He must find a way to see justice done and yet protect his family... and his conscience.

Historical Notes On The Setting Of *The Lord Hani Mysteries*

by N.L. Holmes

This story takes place during the period of Egypt's history known as the New Kingdom, when the country had become an empire with holdings in Nubia to the south and throughout the Levant to the north. It begins around 1350 BCE, the approximate date of the death of Amenhotep III of Egypt. His son succeeded him as Amenhotep IV, later changing his name to Akhenaten as he implemented his religious reforms, replacing with the Aten the Theban gods Amen-Ra and his family and gradually the entire Egyptian pantheon. Although this new religion is sometimes called monotheistic, it was more precisely monolatrous. That is, Akhenaten didn't deny that Amen and other gods existed, he simply decreed that the Aten was the only god Egypt would worship henceforth. Scholars are divided over the idea of a coregency in Amenhotep III's years later, but I have accepted that there was one and settled on a duration of five years. Since Akhenaten is known to have resigned seventeen years, this would move his death date earlier than the commonly accepted one.

The reign of Akhenaten marked a nearly unimaginable overturning of values and customs millennia old, a testimony to the absolute power of the king. But judging by the speed with which his "reforms" were reversed after his death, we must assume that relatively few people really bought into them. His reign is the first and only time that we find intolerance at work in pharaonic Egypt, a country of remarkable open-mindedness, and episodes of defacing tombs, people reporting friends and family, changing their names, etc., were real.

Lord Hani, our protagonist, was a historical person, whose travel as a royal emissary are attested by the Amarna letters. This collection of diplomatic correspondences from the reigns of Amenhotep III and IV were found at Akhetaten (today Tell el-Amarna), the new capital established by Akhenaten. They were mostly written in Akkadian, the diplomatic language of the period, thus deforming the Egyptian names found in them, presumably according to the Semitic pronunciation. The troubles with the *hapiru* and between kings which form the background to our story are described in the letters. Likewise, all the kings and commissioners of Kharu with whom Hani deals in our story -- the Lords Ptah-mes, Yanakh-amu, and Yapakh-addi -- are real, although the relationships and personalities given them in the book are fictitious. Many of the clues are, in fact, events attested in the Amarna letters, but I have woven them together into a fictional connection. Scholars are undecided whether Ptah-mes lived in the early or late part of Amenhotep III's reign; I have accepted the latter.

