



In the Palace of the Khans

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Nigel is spending time with his parents in the tiny mountain state, Dirzhan, where his father is ambassador. Placed precariously between its traditional past and the twenty first century, its development is in the hands of its President Khan, a man with a ruthless reputation. It is a fascinating background that Nigel is recording in a daily blog. Then he is recruited to help the President's daughter, Taeela, improve her English. A real friendship develops; Taeela is just younger than him - then the President is assassinated. Taeela is now the Khanazhana and surrounded by enemies. Nigel is caught up in her desperate flight from the palace and her plan to return to avenge her father.

A new book by Peter Dickinson is always something to be looked forward to. *In the Palace of the Khans* is very much vintage Dickinson, marrying as it does serious contemporary themes with exciting, almost Boy's Own adventure. Here the reader is presented with ideas about power and the use of power, the dilemmas presented in making decisions, the balance between right and wrong and the grey area between, of relationships between families and between young people among others. None of this is heavy handed; they are part of the undercurrents in the storytelling adding a depth to both the action, the place and the characters - especially that of Nigel, who emerges as a very attractive young man as his understanding develops over the course of the story. However, this is also an adventure - and a very exciting one - so Nigel is still the hero at the centre of the action supported by an adult cast. And what an adventure. It involves wild chases across the mountains and, of course, secret passages through the Palace; passages full of deadly traps whose routes have been guarded by the eunuchs of the old court. It is only old Fohdrahko, the last of the eunuchs and Taeela's companion who knows their secrets. This is old fashioned storytelling at its best presented in a clear, lucid, contemporary style that respects the intelligence of its young teenage audience. At a time when many of the themes that Dickinson has treated still feature in novels for young people - *Out of the Shadows* (Wallace); *Hostage Three* (Lake); *Half Brother* (Oppel), and there is a continuing need for good writing for intelligent young readers (who are far from extinct) - it is incomprehensible that Peter Dickinson's books are no longer on every library shelf. The reissue of four of his titles as ebooks must be welcomed - let us hope that they also reappear in hard copy.

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