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THE TAHITIAN HAT CLUB

JULIE O'TOOLE



About this book

The Tahitian Hat Club is famous for its help in solving local murders for the Honolulu police. The club is made up of five older Hawaiian-style aunties who dress in flowery muumuus and iconic Tahitian Hats. Maureen O'Hara is new to Hawaii but must soon travel to Samoa to defend her best friend's cousin against accusations that he committed a vicious, ritualistic killing. His family feels he is a victim of racial prejudice within the Island judicial system. He is innocent, isn't he? Maureen is determined to find out. Romance and revenge nearly derail her efforts. Tahitian Hat Club to the rescue!

About the author

Dr. Julie O'Toole attended Reed College and University of Washington, then received her MD from The Technical University in Aachen, Germany. She completed her pediatric training in Honolulu, Hawaii. Her work involves the study of child behavior, especially in those children whose brains do not function properly in regard to food and survival. On the side she is a botanist, gardener, and writer. She currently practices medicine in Oregon, while engaging in important eating-disorder research with colleagues around the world.

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The three Chinese characters adorn the Kwan Yin Temple in Hawaii.

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For Jamie, just her

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Dr. T.K. Wong slammed shut the heavy door to his silver Jaguar and turned the key that locked all four. *Click.*

Sunlight—not the brash, bright sunlight that usually flooded the streets of Honolulu’s Chinatown, but the hopeful kind of sunlight, the kind that pierces the heaviness of rain clouds and deepens the shadows across the lawns—that sunlight gave his car a dignity transcending even its moneyed elegance. He sighed and tried not to shuffle as he walked towards the carved pillars guarding the entrance to the Temple of Kwan Yin. A street urchin who sold newspapers from a sack he carried on his back shoved his brown face into the doctor’s own and cried in the heavily accented tones of the local pidgin: “Newspapah?”

To be rid of him, Dr. Wong dug in the pocket of his grey tailored pants for some change. His hand shook as he paid and he steadied himself against one of the red pillars to open the paper. “*Makiki Couple Brutally Murdered*” the headlines screamed; with distaste he studied the two photographs. One was taken of a room, an expensive room, whose elegant furniture was in complete disarray. There were no corpses to be seen, but a large dark area of the carpet was clearly someone’s blood. The other photograph was of an elderly Chinese couple, presumably the victims in life.

“Now who in the world would want to murder two old Chinese?” he nearly spoke aloud, and then with a grimace: “Most unfilial behavior.” The eyes of the two old people who

had now become ancestors stared mournfully from the page that the breeze made crackle in his hand. He folded it so that they were not showing and tucked it under his arm.

"Unfilial," he said to himself again, with a touch of irony, then: "Such bullshit! Who is filial these days?" It was an old argument, one he often had with his sister Leonora, and the thought of Leonora brought fresh anxiety, renewing his resolve to seek out the temple.

"You think too much about the old ways," Leonora had told him that very morning over their warm tea and rice soup. "Times have changed."

How absurd she was! A little old Chinese lady, nearly sixty, never married, whose hair was white, who wore flowered *cheong sams* whenever they went out and yet who said "times have changed"—no one had suffered more than she from the fact that times had *not* changed! He sighed. He could never have admitted to anyone how much he loved the sister who was now practically his sole companion. Besides, there was scarcely anyone left to admit it to. Their parents had been dead these thirty years, the father dead in China, their mother, though she had died on Kauai, buried beside him in their ancestral village in Canton Province. There had once been another brother, but he had been killed in the War, the War Chinese Americans had barely been thought good enough to fight. And though Dr. Wong had had a wife, a good wife, he had thought, one his family had introduced to him, one who had given him two sons and a daughter, she, too, was gone, having succumbed to a puzzling and rare cancer of the throat. The children were grown, his two sons doctors themselves, the eldest a heart surgeon in Portland, the youngest a radiologist in San Francisco. *Successful* he reminded himself proudly, for either one made more money

than their father did as an ear nose and throat surgeon. And their sister was married to a wealthy Cantonese businessman and had three boys of her own. *Prosperity*, he nodded as he walked, *Success*. Yes, that was what mattered—in fact, it was all that mattered! And now there was only Leonora who took care of him, who cooked for him and prepared the family altar, who washed his clothes and vacuumed the floor of their expensive but spartan two bedroom condominium in Tantalus. No, times had not changed. At least not for Leonora.

In his preoccupation he nearly tripped over the earthenware pot near the entrance to the temple itself. A bent and sunbeaten female monk was sweeping the steps before him. Two flies buzzed lazily around her shaven head but she made no attempt to brush them away, so intent was she on her task.

He took the marble steps two at a time. *Ah, good!* The temple was empty, it was an off-time. He ignored the altars to various other popular gods and went straight to Kwan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy. It was her intervention he wanted, just hers.

Incense poured over the lip of a squat bronze urn full of sand into which dozens of burning joss sticks had been stabbed. Their fragrant, white smoke floated heavenward, snaking about the altar, before falling to earth and filling the cracks in the smooth stone floor. Somewhere chimes sounded, high and silvery. The nervous beating of his heart slowed. He kneeled before the pyramid of offerings placed at the feet of the Goddess. She smiled kindly at the space in front of her ceramic face, her graceful fingers wrapped around a peach.

Dr. Wong held a bundle of the burning joss sticks to his forehead and bowed to the floor. He tried to speak but no words came. He tried to shut the images of the day from his mind, to still his whirling thoughts, but strands of every-

day concerns pierced his pious concentration: The last instruments he had used, the face of the last patient, the bitter melon he had eaten for lunch, and the newspaper: *Brutally hacked to death with some kind of a primitive weapon* the paper had said and he tried not to picture it. *Brutally hacked to death... brutally hacked... death... brutally...* he took a deep breath and opened his eyes. He looked imploringly at her whom his people call the Compassionate.

“Mercy,” he pleaded, “have mercy.”