

Review of Mendoza in Hollywood

Review of Mendoza in Hollywood – A Company Novel by Kage Baker

How do you feel about a well-constructed world offering an interesting twist on time travel, peopled with complex characters and a constantly surprising storyline? If you haven't already encountered Kage Baker's Company novels, that's the package on offer.

In the twenty-fourth century, The Dr Zeus Company provides artworks and extinct species for rich clients. The workforce are orphans recruited from the past and upgraded to hyper-performance standard, which includes bestowing immortality on these individuals. This raises a variety of interesting scenarios the Company series explores, such as; how do humans cope with everlasting life? What happens when part of your immortal workforce become redundant?

Mendoza in Hollywood is the third Company novel, although untangling the chronological order of this series isn't straightforward, demonstrated by the fact that this book has the alternative title *At the Edge of the West*. In this book, we are reunited with trained botanist, Mendoza, an immortal employee of The Company, who is sent to an isolated stagecoach station on the site of what will turn into Hollywood. Living with her at staging post are other Company agents, all working in difficult, but normal conditions. However, events conspire to ensure that this assignment is anything but routine for the hapless Mendoza...

A masterful storyteller, Baker is capable of spinning an engrossing narrative that skips across timelines and slides between her main characters, which she does in other Company novels. However, this book is in first person viewpoint with Mendoza narrating the events under interrogation, which gives the character an intimacy and immediacy I thoroughly enjoyed.

The concept of Time is examined in this book on several levels. There is the obvious preoccupation of the narrator, a deeply unhappy woman, doomed to an immortal existence. She is tormented with vivid dreams of her dead lover that have not faded with the passage of time – although we discover during the story the reason why...

Mendoza rescues plant species destined to become extinct during the 1863 drought, alongside her young colleague, Einar, performing the same task with the local wildlife. In addition, Einar is also huge film fan. He takes Mendoza on tour around the wild semi-desert countryside, describing where all the famous Hollywood landmarks will be built. The descriptions are lyrical with nostalgic longing for times gone – both of the landscape and Hollywood in its early heyday. It's a neat trick to pull off.

As relief from their primitive discomforts, the immortal team treat themselves to filmshows of the early epic Hollywood era. Mendoza describes these evenings in some detail, giving a running commentary on the action and ideas behind the productions – filtered through the persona of a cynical three hundred year old. As an artefact created in one time-bubble is being consumed in another – how much should we overlay the preconceptions of our own period on such a product? A highly pertinent question for anyone watching movies produced before we were born. There is a moving scene when one character suffers an emotional fugue watching Griffith's film *Intolerance* because she had actually lived through Babylonian times – and unexpectedly encountering a recreation of her own time so many hundreds of years later, was too much to bear.

I am conscious that this reads as if Mendoza in Hollywood is worthy, if somewhat grim effort at exploring the nature of time. What I've omitted to mention is that the plot provides plenty of adventure. Moreover, Baker has a sense of humour – and unlike many great science fiction writers – isn't afraid to use it. The dialogue is sharply witty and Mendoza's acerbic asides often had me chuckling aloud. In addition, while there are also scenes of great poignancy, there is also some knockabout farcical stuff. For instance, when a jealous ex-lover goes on a drunken rampage, the efforts of the immortal team to diffuse the situation without betraying their superhuman abilities, is hilarious.

However, for me, the shining jewel is the characterisation of Mendoza. We get to know her deepest fears and recollections, the worst and the best of her. In an outstanding series – which I've bought as an early Christmas present to myself – this is the best book of them all.

10/10