



keyword

[ARCHIVES](#) [CALENDAR](#)

[HOME](#) [NEWS](#) [ARTS](#) [BOOKS](#) [FOOD](#) [SCREENS](#) [MUSIC](#) [CALENDAR](#) [CITY GUIDE](#) [CLASSIFIEDS](#) [PERSONALS](#) [PROMOTIONS](#)

[featured stories](#) [under the covers \(blog\)](#) [news/print](#) [book reviews](#) [litera listings](#) [short story contest](#)

HOME: JANUARY 12, 2001: BOOKS

TEXT SIZE - / + / ++

Readings

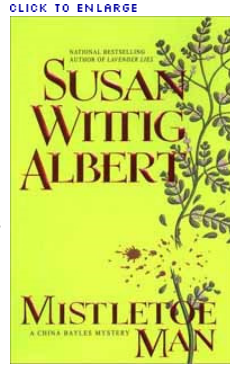
BY ANNA HANKS

Mistletoe Man: A China Bales Mystery

by Susan Wittig Albert

Berkeley, 296 pp., \$21.95

We all know that good fences make good neighbors, but judging from *Mistletoe Man*, the latest herbal whodunit in local writer Susan Wittig Albert's China Bales series, sloppy fences make good lawsuits. The recently married China is a recovering lawyer who owns Thyme and Seasons, the local herbal shop in the fictional Hill Country hamlet of Pecan Springs. The shop is cozy and profitable with stone walls, bottles of essential oils, handmade wreaths, and an antique cash register to ring it all up on. China's best friend Ruby Wilcox runs the equally alternative shop The Crystal Cave. Fifty years ago two women running these kinds of businesses in rural Texas would have been run out of town on their broomsticks.



But times change. Pecan Springs seems as progressive as Austin with easier parking downtown. China and Ruby are pillars of the Pecan Springs community and China has even been invited to open up the "big, white Victorian house" where China and her new husband McQuaid live (along with his 13-year-old son) for a Christmas tour of homes.

The Thyme and Seasons shop is having a good Christmas, so much so that China is having a hard time keeping handmade wreaths in stock. Alas, China has trouble with the various people who supply her decorations. In fact, the cranky mistletoe seller turns up suspiciously dead. Soon after, Terry and Donna, the wreath-making women who live next door to him, quickly become top suspects.

Each chapter of *Mistletoe Man* is preceded by a short passage providing details about mistletoe -- its cultivation, harvest, and usage in different cultures, from the ancient Greeks to its presence in *The Golden Bough* by Sir James George Frazer. Some of these short passages are from China's own book, *Mistletoe Magic*.

While longtime fans of the Bales books will be rewarded with the true-to-the-series formula, *Mistletoe Man* often seems pedantic and predictable. Part of the trouble is China herself. She's a nice-enough character, but she's so earnest! She's no quippy Kinsey Millhone. This is the ninth book in the China Bales series, so it's difficult to keep things fresh. I wasn't compelled to finish the book in one sitting; the main problem with *Mistletoe Man* is that it feels devoid of passion and excitement. And I saw the end coming long before I should have. It's the literary equivalent of meeting your old aunt Irene under the mistletoe: Tepid, not spicy.

MORE BOOK REVIEWS IN THIS ISSUE

- [An American Outrage: A Novel of Quillifarkeag, Maine](#)
- [Zeitgeist](#)
- [Mistletoe Man: A China Bales Mystery](#)

Share

[Email](#) [Print article](#) [Digg](#) [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Del.icio.us](#) [LinkedLn](#)

POST A COMMENT

UserName: Password:

Headline (optional):

- COMMENT ON THIS STORY
- WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR
- PRINT THIS STORY
- EMAIL STORY TO A FRIEND
- DIGG IT
- DEL.ICIO.US

FURTHER READING

Keywords

- for this story
- [Mistletoe Man: A China Bales Mystery](#)
- [Susan Wittig Albert](#)

CALENDAR TODAY

[University of Texas](#)

BLOGS

- [School Closings Under Fire](#)
- [Leffingwell Bites the Apple](#)
- [The Daily Hustle: 1/12/11](#)

FORUMS

- [Will Texas Be Safe Haven for Romeos and Juliets?](#)
- [Leffingwell Bites the Apple](#)
- [Holly Won't Go Lightly](#)

ARCHIVES

- More from **January 12, 2001**
- [News](#)
- [Arts](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Food](#)
- [Screens](#)
- [Music](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Columns](#)

Browse the Archives by [Issue](#) [Author](#) [Column](#) [Review](#) [Section](#)

Copyright © 1995-2011 Austin Chronicle Corp. All rights reserved.

[HOME](#) | [NEWS](#) | [ARTS](#) | [BOOKS](#) | [FOOD](#) | [SCREENS](#) | [MUSIC](#) | [CALENDAR](#) | [CITY GUIDE](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#) | [PERSONALS](#) | [PROMOTIONS](#)

[best of austin](#) | [find a paper](#) | [submit an event](#) | [info](#) | [advertise with us](#) | [national advertising](#) | [contact](#) | [privacy](#) | [oops!](#)