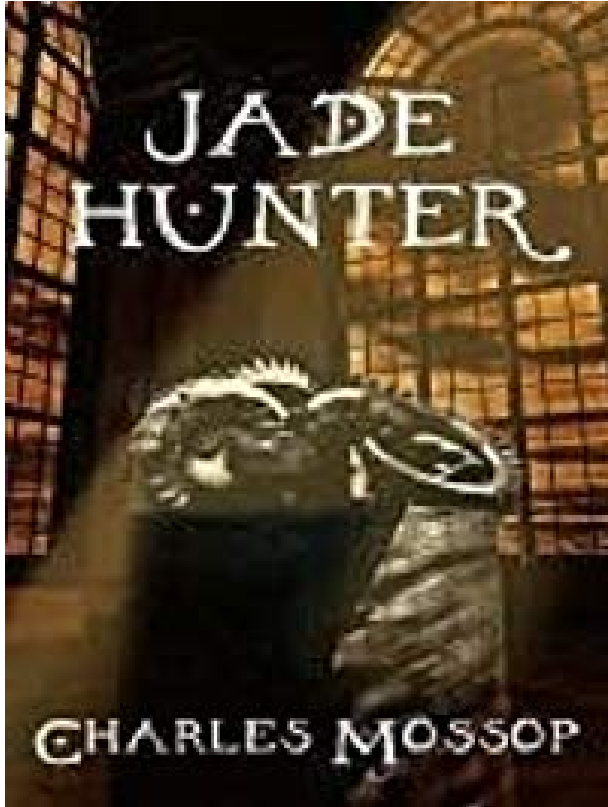


Jade Hunter



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In the mid-fifteenth century a unique piece of jade is discovered in south-western China. Within days its discoverer is murdered. The jade is stolen, but the thieves themselves die at the hands of a cousin of the emperor Dai Zong, a powerful military leader, who sends the jade to Beijing where it is carved into a masterpiece depicting two identical dragons. Identical, that is, but for one remarkable feature. The sculpture is presented to the emperor by his kinsman but he spurns the gift and the jade is stolen once again and sold out of China along the Silk Road to Arabia. From Baghdad the sculpture crosses the Mediterranean Sea to Italy where it becomes the property of the mighty Medici family of Florence, but eventually even they are forced by the Church to relinquish it. The sculpture travels north to Bruges from where it is acquired by English merchants who try to sell it to King Henry VIII. The attempt proves catastrophic, however, due to wholly unexpected circumstances, and an enraged King Henry orders it destroyed, a fate only narrowly escaped through the intervention of a nobleman who sends the carving away from London. Descendants of that aristocrat re-discover the sculpture after centuries of concealment, neglect, war and rebellion, and it is placed aboard an English warship which sails the high seas before going to war against Napoleon. Its rightful ownership disputed at the end of the war, the sculpture is hidden and remains lost for over a hundred years. This sweeping tale of mystery and adventure is played out against the backdrop story of Jill Howard, a young British sinologist, who discovers the story of the carving in an ancient Chinese text and determines to find it and return it to China. She finally discovers a report that it has been destroyed in a fire, but is that truly the end of its colourful history?