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## **REFINEMENTS OF LOVE**

*By Sarah Booth Conroy*

*285 pp. Pantheon/Cornelia & Michael Bessie.*

After Marian "Clover" Adams's death by potassium cyanide poisoning on Dec. 6, 1885, her husband destroyed her personal writings and conspicuously omitted his wife of 13 years from his famous autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*." Veteran Washington Post columnist Sarah Booth Conroy theorizes in this debut historical novel something far more sinister than the commonly espoused suicide explanation for Mrs. Adams's death. Buoyed by provocative, if unconvincing, appendices citing evidence to question Clover's suicide as well as Mr. Adams's sexuality, this admirably researched I-know-who-really-dunit tale never slips past improbable into absurd. On the contrary, cloaked within the disavowing vestment of "fiction," Ms. Conroy's suppositions, amply spiced with period detail, grow into an absorbing tableau of life a short stroll from Grover Cleveland's White House. In this genteel world of dinner parties among those whose fingers held the pulse of federal power, Clover Adams, so bright and creative that she was said to have inspired material for her friend Henry James's fiction, finds life with her cold, egocentric husband like being "left at a dead-end street without a map." In expansive private journal entries that detail the final six weeks of her life, Clover articulates copious nuances of pain and frustration implicit in the powerlessness of even the most esteemed wives of the period. Clover's witty, antique voice, void of self-pity, adds lyric poignancy to this account of how gender and a callous husband sentence her to diminished personhood, throttled creativity and loveless nights.