

BOOK REVIEW

The Art of Dying ***by Ambrose Parry***

Paperback, 416 pages (also available in other formats)
Black Thorn, ISBN 9781786896735
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Using an established historical person as a device in fiction is tricky. If it doesn't ring true, it sends the reader off to check the facts. However, the presence of Dr (later Sir) James Simpson and his introduction of chloroform for anaesthesia in this book is just that, a device for the central plot. Chloroform plays a pivotal role and not always for benign purposes. Ambrose Parry (pseudonym for an author and anaesthetist couple) manages this well.

The story is of murders and heroic surgery. It takes place in 1849 Edinburgh. Contemporary accounts indicate that Simpson had serious professional rivals. When a patient dies in odd circumstances, Simpson's enemies attempt to turn the case against him.

Simpson's assistant Will Raven and Simpson's one-time housemaid Sarah Fisher, now married and helping Simpson with minor clinical tasks, try to find the truth. They want to restore Simpson's name— and Raven also hopes that he will make a name for himself by identifying a new disease.

Raven is almost a Jekyll and Hyde character, capable of violence which frightens him. He has an involvement with the Edinburgh underworld. Sarah has married a doctor and wants to be a doctor herself, but because this is 1849, she hovers in a social limbo.

Interspersed with the narrative of Sarah and Raven are first person accounts of a very different existence, someone also drawn to medicine but for whom the motives of power and control are uppermost. These are well written sections and make plausible the cruelty and the deviousness of the character behind the growing number of murders.

The relationship between Raven and Sarah is the second important theme. There are other threads of plot whose purposes are not entirely clear – are they intended to reveal aspects of Raven's character, red herrings or pleasure in including historical detail?

The Art of Dying creates presents the dark side of Edinburgh in the mid-19th century. It is more the city of Burke and Hare, only 20 years previously, than Edinburgh Medical School. Our detectives are in danger and there is a good twist that temporarily foils them. The book concludes in an unexpectedly satisfactory way for Sarah. It may not be so for Raven. It is an entertaining account, without illustrations, for the medical historian and general reader with good medical history, adjusted slightly to fit the plot.

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