

what the critics are saying about

The Conjuror

by

Cordelia Frances Biddle

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Book Review | Mystery opens underbelly of Philadelphia society, 1842

The Conjuror By Cordelia Frances Biddle

Thomas Dunne / St. Martin's.

306 pp. \$23.95

Reviewed by Edward Pettit

Cordelia Frances Biddle's new mystery, *The Conjuror*, is set in Philadelphia in 1842. The protagonist, Martha Beale, is a wealthy daughter of high society whose father has gone missing in mysterious circumstances. Did he accidentally fall into the frigid, raging currents of the Schuylkill? Or was he pushed? Is he even dead?

Martha, until now sheltered by her imposing father from the corrupting ways of the world, must learn the truth. In doing so, she discovers the men of her blueblood society operate as a kind of secret organization, plotting to not only control their wives and children, but also to keep hidden the inner workings of their financial empires. With the help of Thomas Kelman, the city official assigned to investigate her father's disappearance, Martha pulls back the curtain and sees not just a hapless want-to-be wizard, but something much worse.

Biddle pays a great deal of attention to the manners and mores of her upper-crust characters. She delineates how their social practices shape their behavior, as well as the very philosophies by which they live, from the correct color of a gown for a particular season or occasion to the correct room in which one should receive particular visitors. I was a little leery that I had stumbled into one of those cozy mysteries written for little old ladies who live in quaint country cottages (with several cats). But the action of the novel soon took a decidedly grim turn.

Kelman, the investigator, is also on the trail of a serial killer who has been murdering child prostitutes in the city's brothels. The conjurer of the title, Eusapio

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Paladino, seems to be channeling the victims while he performs seances at dinner parties of wealthy citizens (during which he also entices the wives of his high-society patrons to become his mistresses). Indeed, all of Biddle's characters have secret inner lives that chafe at the severe restraints with which their society has bound them. Most acquiesce. Some, like Martha, seek to break free. Some twist their desires into murderous impulses that trail them like shadows through the murky alleyways of the city at night.

The 1840s in Philadelphia were rife with tumult and strife, economic crises, crusading battles for labor improvements, gang warfare, riots aplenty, and the new "penny press" catering to the lurid scandals of the day. One newspaperman of the time, George Lippard, wrote a scathing novel, *The Quaker City, or the Monks of Monk-Hall*, in which the leading citizens of Philadelphia meet in an old mansion to drink, seduce innocent young women, and murder their rivals. Lippard's indictment of the city was so popular it became the best-selling novel in the United States until Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Philadelphia was bursting with a raw, urban energy, a newborn giant in the first days of the new American Republic. Biddle successfully taps into this energy in her novel.

I have always been surprised that there were not more historical mysteries set in Philadelphia, it being such rich ground for the machinations and murder that make up the genre. A few years ago, Mark Graham wrote some novels set in the 1870s in which a police inspector solves the unbrotherly crimes of Philadelphia, but this series ended after only three excellently written books (the last, *The Black Maria*, won an Edgar Award).

Biddle also successfully uses 19th-century Philadelphia, mining the landscape for the kinds of jewels that illuminate a good mystery, and shaping characters that ring true to the elements of their creation. *The Conjuror* is a worthy inclusion in the genre, and I hope there are many more Martha Beale mysteries to come.