

'Bodysnatcher', by Carol Margaret Davison

Review by Matthew Macdonald



Set against a backdrop of the devastating poverty and casual violence of early nineteenth-century Edinburgh, *Bodysnatcher* is woven around the murderous spree of Messrs William Burke and William Hare. Carol Margaret Davison's debut novel is a tightly constructed and intelligent work that neither shies away from nor glories in the wanton violence so commonly associated with these notorious 'bodysnatchers'.

Significant cultural attention has been paid to the infamous murders of 1828 - in fiction such as David Pae's *Mary Paterson, or, The Fatal Error* (1864-65), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Body-snatchers* (1884), and Elizabeth Byrd's *Rest Without Peace* (1974) and *The Search for Maggie Hare* (1976), as well as countless documentaries and true crime podcasts. The story of the gruesome Edinburgh pair and their willingness to commit abominable acts in the name of illicit gain provides a rich seam of inspiration to draw from. Yet, like the many retellings of Jack the Ripper, much of the literature that centres on the Burke and Hare murders adds almost mythological proportions to the perpetrators and their actions, through which it is easy to lose sight of their more realistic and mundane elements.

Davidson's characterisations of Burke and Hare are grounded in the richly

detailed setting of Regency-era Edinburgh. These are not towering figures of horrific violence, nor are they comedy foils with a whimsical indifference to what's happening around them: these are people forged in the poverty and oppression of the period in a manner that reads so realistically it could be mistaken for biography rather than a combination of true crime and horror fiction.

Burke and Hare are often placed as the main focus of narratives on these events, yet Davidson deviates from this norm and, as a result, elevates her storytelling beyond many others who have tried to tackle this story. The dual narrative is split between the viewpoints of Burke and his common-law wife, Nelly McDougal, with Davidson's decision to give Nelly a voice and perspective an insightful one. Often, much of the focus in fiction and other narratives based on true crime is placed on the perpetrators, with little attention paid to the victims, who are often women (eleven of the sixteen people killed by Burke and Hare were women). By centring Nelly in the narrative - who, like Margaret Hare, was abused by her partner - Davidson shines a light not only on one who endured the horror of Burke but, more widely, the experience of working-class women.

The evocative and damning portrayal of events makes *Bodysnatcher* a novel that lingers in the mind long after reading through Davidson's skilful fleshing out of the characters - particularly the depraved Burke and the gritty Nelly - while unravelling and bringing to light the little-known intricacies of the case. Presented in their historical context, with a modern understanding of the psyche, these horrifying events are shown in a decidedly unvarnished manner. Yet, through her masterful descriptions and imagery Davidson demonstrates her ability to achieve poeticism amid depravity, as seen when Nelly describes herself early on in the novel as fulfilling the role of 'death's midwife'.

With its nuanced exploration of religion, gender and class, as well as its captivating characterisation and haunting understanding of how this level of brutality fundamentally changes who you are as a human being, this novel is a standout work of fiction that offers a new take on one of Scotland's most infamous stories.



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