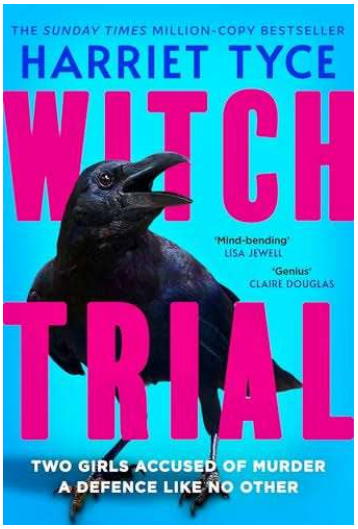
# ‘Witch Trial’, by Harriet Tyce

## Review by Martyn Colebrook




Prior to her appearance on *The Traitors*, Harriet Tyce was a novelist with an international profile who had written such critically acclaimed books as her debut *Blood Orange* (2019) and *A Lesson in Cruelty* (2024). With her latest novel, *Witch Trial* (2026), the global audience her writing has attracted is set to be enhanced further. Tyce’s debut was recognised as a *Richard and Judy Book Club* choice and is where this reviewer first encountered the slick prose, the pacy plots which underpin a consummately executed psychological thriller. That the author’s background is in the legal profession is apparent with the keen eye for technical procedure and regulations. Her Scottish roots may also inform the different Gothic thematic concerns within her oeuvre; doubling, split personalities, psychological trauma and, in her latest work, witchcraft. Introducing a supernatural element is a development for Tyce and once which she handles with aplomb.

The plot is, on the face of it, simple: Isobel Smyth and Eliza Lawson are two teenage girls who are on trial and accused of scaring their schoolmate, Christian, to death using the principles of witchcraft. Debates around culpability, the mental capacities of girls and the stability of their home lives, the hidden biases which jurors bring to the court and the ethics around how legal principles are treated all act as compelling scene setting for the actors in this particular drama. What emerges is a complex thrill-ride in which the reader is drawn into a web of

intrigue that blends the finest qualities of a thriller with the allusive acknowledgement of momentous texts from the canon of Scottish Literature which are transformed into contemporary settings.

Matthew Phillips is a heart surgeon based in Edinburgh – a specialist who holds the possibility of life or death in his hands every time he wields the scalpel. His life is one of complexity with a highly pressured professional life, a wife with whom he has a volatile relationship that is informed by his drinking coping mechanism, and a younger lover whose interest in him burns hot and cold. He does not own a smartphone – an 'analogue man in a digital world' – and he reserves the right to cast his acerbic judgement over those he considers inferior to him in the manner befitting an upper-middle class male. Prior to his introduction, the principle of the Hippocratic oath is manipulated:

'First, do no harm.

But there's always moment when it's too late, the point past which the decision could have been made, the one from which no harm was done. […] Matthew Phillips doesn't know that this is one of those moments.' (1) For a reader and a reviewer with an appreciation of cineastes, such an opening paragraph is resonant of a voice-over with the omniscient narrator introducing a character who will play a key role, unwittingly or otherwise. The scene is drenched in pre-destination and foreboding, perfect for a dreich day in the city of ghosts. Despite Matthew believing his actions hereafter will determine the future of those on trial, he is unaware of his own trials which are forthcoming.

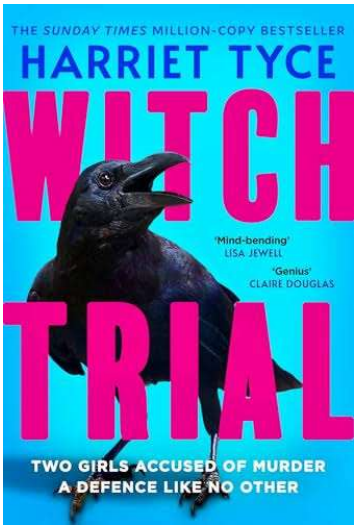
For Matthew, jury service offers a temporary escape from his professional and personal troubles. Declining the opportunity to opt for a different date, he spurns the opportunity for holiday with his wife – the first since their daughter moved to university – and a critical triple bypass operation at work which has been imposed on him by Dominic, his senior colleague.  As the jurors are asked to disclose any personal connections to the defendants, two teenage girls named Isobel Smyth and Eliza Lawson, Matthew notices a woman who seems to be 'thinking about potential horrors, relishing the thought.' (3). Later she meets his gaze, mutual recognition of their desire to witness 'photos of pain, of extremity, twisted limbs and bloodied flesh.' (4)  His fascination with the pageantry and antiquated process and rituals of the court reinforce this sense of the clash between ancient and modern which we see in the character of Matthew, almost a tension between

his desire to participate in a fetishised cinematic experience and not just the responsibility which lies in his decisions.

Whilst is may seem disproportionate to focus such a large part of a review on the scene-setting, this is because Tyce delivers such a sophisticated plot that I am almost tempted to use the term Macguffin, with all deliberate nods to the cinematic qualities which are embedded in this novel. Temporally, the narrative takes place over the course of two weeks using the format of a diary with metatexts that constitute letters and legal documents. What purports to be a single authored text which takes place over a period of two weeks turns out to a highly intelligent and nuanced study which exceeds expectations. To interrogate the text further is outwith the scope of this review and would potentially expose critical parts and clues before the reader has had chance to devour this sumptuous piece of fiction.

For those who seek cerebral stimulation that runs comfortably alongside a rip-snorter of a novel, Tyce's latest piece of fiction cements her place among the key writers in this genre. With *Witch Trial* I suspect there is an option being prepared for a film adaptation. As for Harriet Tyce, she remains box office quality – devilishly so.

Witch Trial is published by Wildfire.

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