



The English Monster

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In the east end of Regency London, two families lie butchered. Residents of the notorious Ratcliffe Highway, the victims bear the mark of unprecedented brutality.

Panic sweeps the country as its public cries for justice. But these murders stem from an older horror, its source a sea voyage two centuries old. In a ship owned by Queen Elizabeth herself, a young man embarks on England's first venture into a new trade: human souls.

As a nation's sins ripen and bloom, to be harvested in a bloody frenzy on the twisted streets of Regency Wapping, an English Monster is born.

The English Monster Details

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From Reader Review The English Monster for online ebook

Chloé says

Really don't bother with this. It takes almost 3/4 of the book for the link between the stories to be revealed and even then it's a disappointment. Painfully drawn out.

AdiTurbo says

DNF. 14%. This might have been a great novel - it is clearly based on wide research and knowledge, and there's an interesting murder mystery in it somewhere. There may even be a few potentially-interesting characters in it, but the writer has chosen to focus all of his creative energy on describing roads, walls, architecture, and suchlike. He is in fact so obsessed with these, that he devotes pages to their descriptions, on the expense of anything else. So by now I now pretty much all about the walls built by a Dutchman to close the Thames in, but almost nothing at all about the family murdered, the police officer investigating the case, the girl and watchman who found them, and the mystery itself. Also, what's the deal with the other story going on, about a young man boarding a ship - does it ever get to the point? Do I care? Sorry, can't go on, too bored.

Katie Ward says

Lloyd Shepherd's debut, *The English Monster*, begins with a puzzle: six pirates are hanged from the gallows by a river; five of them are dead, but one of them is only pretending to be dead.

It is an enticing hook – macabre and gory – and sets the tone for a yarn which is part pirate adventure, part detective story, part historical fiction and part horror.

The novel is broadly set over two time periods, with two narratives.

In 1564 (during the reign of Queen Elizabeth) a flotilla of ships, captained by John Hawkyms, is on a clandestine trade mission; his crew includes Billy Ablass, a young man seeking his fortune.

In 'the present' (1811), the local officials in Shadwell and Wapping bungle the investigation into a set of apparently motiveless killings, which will go down in history as the Ratcliffe Highway murders. The jaded magistrate, John Harriott, undertakes to catch the perpetrator, with the assistance of Waterman-Constable Charles Horton.

John Hawkyms's voyage, a real historical event, was the first official attempt to exploit what Shepherd chillingly refers to as 'African treasure'. Rumours fly above and below decks as Billy Ablass pieces together the purpose of their grizzly assignment. It will spawn a global trade, generating fabulous wealth for some – and unimaginable suffering for a great many others. The riches seem to be guaranteed; the question becomes whether Billy will return to his beloved wife, Abigail, with his body and soul still intact?

Meanwhile, the 19th century murders take place in a filthy maritime metropolis on the Thames. Trade (with a capital 'T') is the lifeblood of the riverside community now living in fear. Law and Order, by comparison, is still in its infancy. There are no established procedures to run an effective murder investigation, only the intuition of Waterman-Constable Charles Horton, a character with a shady past and an undignified fascination with the facts that is ahead of his time. It is he who discovers the killer's calling card, a silver piece of eight.

Shepherd's imagination is dark and disconcerting. He has knitted together two distinct episodes from British history (or rather, English history) to make a ghoulish exploration of greed, bloodlust and perceived entitlement. This novel is very much a post-Credit Crunch work; it is a story of how the mindless pursuit

wealth – at the expense of people – is ugly, immoral and devastating.

The corruption of young Billy Ablast is more successfully drawn than the Regency murder mystery.

Occasionally, Shepherd is distracted by his admiration of the historical figure of John Harriott, when he has actually created a compelling new detective in Charles Horton who deserves more time centre stage.

Despite this, The English Monster is atmospheric, gruesome and compelling. With Shepherd as their quartermaster, readers who enjoyed 'Perfume' by Patrick Suskind will find plenty on this voyage to appal and intrigue them.

David Cross says

Murders, detectives, pirates, London history. What more could you look for in a novel? What's that you say? A touch of magical realism? Well, you're in luck. It has that too.

It's hard to explain this novel without giving too much away. The story starts in two different historical periods - Wapping at the time of the Ratcliffe Highway murders and Plymouth in 1564 as Billy Ablast sets off for the Caribbean on board one of England's first slaving ships. There is a reason for these two different settings, but no-one who has read the book will tell you what it is. You'll just have to read it and find out for yourself.

I love novels which draw on the history of London. And Regency Wapping at the time that the London Docks were just getting going is a fascinating (and incredibly well-drawn) setting. If you enjoy the kind of London-based novels that Peter Ackroyd writes (and who doesn't?) then I'm sure you'll enjoy this.

And if this doesn't convince you then just try reading the first chapter. If that doesn't draw you in then you have no curiosity.

Kathryn says

I am flummoxed as to how there are so many 4 or even 5 star reviews on this novel.

The first 100+ pages are almost unreadable they are so dull; the following 300 range from rubbish to brief elements of decent writing. The story - or stories, as it were - does not gain momentum in any interesting way, and there are no satisfying conclusions or results.

I don't think this book is particularly well written, either, although the Author's Note at the end demonstrates that the author is adept at journalistic writing, which he should perhaps stick with.

This is one of the worst books I've read in a long time. It was a chore to get through.

Well, I think I've made my point, which is: don't read this book!

Gerry says

When I saw 'The English Monster' on the bookshelves and then read the blurb I thought that it would be a

good read with its background of the real-life story of the Ratcliffe Highway murders. Sadly I was wrong.

There seems to be (I have to say that because, despite my best efforts I was unable to finish the book) two strands to the story, one set in the 16th/17th century and one set in the 19th century. How the two come together I was trying to work out when I abandoned the book as taking too much of my time for so little reward.

It has a promising beginning, after opening in the 16th century, when it reverts to Wapping and the dockland in the 19th century. The Marr family is found murdered and John Harriott, magistrate of the Thames River Police, begins an investigation. Later the Williamsons' are murdered and Harriott and his senior officer, Charles Horton, search Wapping for the perpetrators of the crime and at this point the feeling of the sinful dockland area are admirably captured even if the characters involved aren't.

However, in between, we divert back to those earlier years where a certain William 'Billy' Ablass holds sway. Holds sway for what I am not sure but later on he does get involved in the early slave trade before suddenly emerging many years later in Florida. Meanwhile Harriott continues his search ... and there it ended - for me anyway.

I am afraid I could not tie the two strands of the story together and could not even imagine what the connection was. I feel it is perhaps not Mr Shepherd but my own inability to assimilate the two parts of the story. And as that was the case, the more I continued the more I lost the will to read again. Not wanting this feeling to set in on a permanent basis, after many attempts to continue I did concede defeat by around page 200 - sorry Mr Shepherd but this tale was just not for me.

I wonder how it ended and if I could then have seen the plot in its entirety? If what I had already read was anything to go by, I very much doubt it!

Melanie Trevelyan says

I enjoyed this book as it was quite different from most of the other books out there at the moment!

Combining the grimy dockyards of Wapping and the exotic Jamaica.

The story combines a shipping expedition to collect slaves and the descriptions of the capture of the slaves and the treatment of them is detailed and disturbing making the title *The English Monster* very apt. What happens to Billy Ablass on one of these expeditions is startling and links the two parts of the story together. Two centuries later someone is committing grisly murders, again the detail of these scenes is not for the faint hearted! Suspects come and a go but the lack of authority and the disarray of the magistrates make catching the one responsible more difficult. As slavery becomes outlawed it is driven underground, slave ships refitted or quietly sold on.

The Royal Society is holding secrets as well, and has been for some time, it is only when the unofficial investigation of Horton takes decisive action that the true horror from both sides is put to rest. The detail in the book is credible and informative and the characters vivid. The sense of the different environments in which the characters find themselves in are vibrant and captivating, this may not be an 'easy' read in the sense of the subject matter but it will make you think and is definitely worth a look.

Michael Harling says

One gets the impression that Mr. Shepherd did a lot of research for this book, and couldn't wait to show it

off. To be fair, the flavor of the different eras the book visits does come through, but it is a bit thick. It takes many paragraphs for a character to take a short walk down a street due to the many, many buildings and customs they notice along the way.

This would be forgivable if it was accompanied by an intriguing plot but, overall, I found the narrative pointless. The unusual device Mr. Shepherd employs (no spoiler here) seems to have been invented for the sole purpose of allowing him to shoehorn in more of his research material because, in actual fact, the "surprising plot twist" has almost nothing to do with the main story, which is slow-moving and pointless itself.

I found myself skimming quite a bit.

I don't like being overly-critical of an author's efforts; other people, I am sure, will be thrilled by the descriptions and plot of this book. I was not.

Ellie says

The year is 1811. On the streets of Wapping, a family have been brutally slaughtered in their home. There is no motive and the police on land have no interest in investigations. However the watermen who patrol the river have other ideas. Jump back in time to 1564 and a ship is setting sail to the coast of Africa, embarking on a mission that will change history, and not for the better.

The English Monster paints a murky picture of Britain's maritime history, there's a real sense of how the streets of around London's burgeoning docklands would have felt at the time. There are lots of historical elements woven into the fiction and there is a pretty comprehensive author's note to explain what is more fact than fiction and vice versa, just in case you keep putting the book down to google names and events. It is not straight historical fiction so history purists may want to back away now. It's hard to explain this novel without spoilers but it will help to keep an open mind that something other may be going on. I think the author has hinted enough to this fact in interviews that it will not be too big of a spoiler on my shoulders.

Based on the real life Ratcliffe Highway murders, it also highlights the huge difference between the early days of policing and what we know now. The city-based police did not care at all about solving crimes and were most likely to arrest criminals caught in the act or if they conveniently fell at their feet. Don't expect a riveting historical police procedure because, in all seriousness, they were no procedures. This is itself is a fascinating facet of the novel.

However not all the story is set in 1811 and it has what I like to call the Cloud Atlas Effect, in which the story jumps in time and place without any obvious connections, other than the maritime element. Unlike Cloud Atlas, it all does come together in the end but I felt it slowed down the pace. I would be getting into one plot-line and all of a sudden would have to reacquaint myself with another set of characters. And there are quite a lot of characters, so I never felt I got to know any of them very well. Perhaps that is the pitfall of historical fiction, there is only so much you can make up about real people, especially those whose lives are well documented. It would be fictional justice for John Hawkyins to fall overboard and be eaten by sharks but history means we (I had to look him up) know he goes on to live a life of praise. Boo hiss.

It occurred to me that the real English Monster of the title may not be the 19th century murderer but instead, the slave trade, sanctioned by the crown and responsible for so much suffering. Some of the scenes may be hard to read but unfortunately they are based on history that many would prefer to brush under the carpet.

Lloyd Shepherd has a journalistic and digital background which may explain the use of parentheses throughout the text. I am not used to these in fiction (but I do use them myself (quite a lot)) and they seem a little modern compared to the language used but I am no means an expert on the history of punctuation.

I had a bit of an immature giggle at the naked gunfight (piqued your interest have I?) and pendulous cocks but mostly it's a dark and sinister tale. I think it would make a great book group choice, there is plenty to discuss and you wouldn't have to tiptoe round spoilers either. Whilst it is a great standalone read it hopefully marks the start of a series which I look forward to seeing more of in the future.

Patrizia says

As much as anyone, Lloyd Shepard reminds me of Christopher Priest at his most lucid and layered. In fact, *The English Monster* and *The Prestige* share a common theme -- a protagonist who's the consummate Outsider and who, during the course of the narrative, grows less and less human. The fault is not his own, of course, but you are still chilled by the transformation.

The novel is structured as parallel stories separated by some 250 years, which makes the first 100 pages or so confusing. Also, of course, Billy Ablast's story by necessity *has* to be mystifying. When the two narrative strands finally knit together, it's a page turner. Can't wait for Lloyd Shepard's next novel.

Karen says

I struggled with this book. For me it was trying to do too much and ended up not doing enough. The secret of Long Billy was unnecessary and took up too much of the plot. I understand the author's desire to place slavery in its context but that whole part of the book just seemed like research showing off - I found out all of this information in my background reading and I am going to shoehorn it in somehow. It did nothing to progress the plot. As a consequence the actual meat of the story had to be sliced wafer-thin and in the end you didn't really care about the murders or the investigators. I wouldn't bother reading another, which is a failure on the part of the author as this is the first in a series.

Bill Lynas says

For a debut novel Lloyd Shepherd's *The English Monster* is a seamlessly entertaining mixture of fact & fiction. Set in two time zones, which eventually link together, there are well drawn characters & good dialogue. I loved Shepherd's description of someone's face, when he says that they looked like a rat sucking on a lemon.

The 1500 story is a sea faring adventure featuring some interesting real life characters, but my favourite parts of the book are those set around the Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811. On the strength of this story alone I will certainly be reading Shepherd's other novels. In fact a friend of mine has already lent me the next story (thanks, Amy) & another friend of mine who told me about *The English Monster* (thanks, Mike) has bought the next two books in the series.

Wanda says

15 JUN 2014 -- Game of Thrones season finale tonight. I am sad to see the end of another season and to have such a long wait until the next. But, on the bright side, I will now have one more day to read.

Honestly, I will begin reading this one tomorrow.

17 JUN 2014 -- Easily readable and peopled with likely characters makes this a quick read. Heck, I am already up to Part 2. It is an ebook so I will take a look at the Table of Contents to see what this translates to page-wise. Equals Page 127 of 337. Wow.

20 JUN 2014 -- Nearly finished. This book is creepy because you know parts are true; however, even the made-up bits could be true. Will finish tonight.

21 JUN 2014 -- There is much to enjoy in The English Monster. Good writing, well-developed characters, dual storylines which culminate in an outstanding ending. Oh, and, just because I feel I must tell you -- there is a naked gun fight. Now, that bit got your attention, so go and enjoy this book.

Amy says

An absolutely brilliant premise that was well researched; however, outside of that I am hard-pressed to say anything else positive about this debacle. I am at a complete loss as to why there are so many 4 and 5 star reviews, but what do I know? It certainly isn't the first time I've been in the minority. For me, the book was just plain boring. On and on about nothing that pertains to the story, and very little about any of the characters that consequently I never connected with.

Essie Fox says

Although it won't be published until early 2012, I've been lucky enough to read a proof copy of this book which I thoroughly enjoyed and admired.

The English Monster is a refreshing example of intelligent and cleverly constructed historical fiction which also has a tantalising plot.

With two separate narrative strands which start out as being centuries apart before gradually merging into an explosive climax, Lloyd Shepherd's debut novel is at first glance a relatively straight-forward criminal mystery. But, do not be fooled. This compelling tale is something more unique than that.

The 'present day' strand of the story is based in 1811, at the end of the great Age of Wonder which has opened up advancements in politics, science and industry, and where London's darker soul has been evolving and crystallising into a place where those early upholders of the law, such as the magistrate John Harriot and water-constable Charles Horton, are now investigating several violent and seemingly motiveless killings in the area of Wapping. The Ratcliffe Highway Murders are the terrible, real life events around which Lloyd Shepherd has woven these sections of his novel.

The earlier strand of the story is also based in reality, beginning in 1564 when the fictional young Billy

Albass leaves his new bride in England to seek the financial fortune on which he hopes to secure the future of their married life. He joins a trading vessel - one that was actually owned by Queen Elizabeth and on which the young Francis Drake also sailed - which is setting out on a mission to seek lucrative 'African Treasure'. But for African Treasure read human beings – and then watch in horror as Shepherd draws the shameful and vivid picture of the English slave trade's vile beginnings – a trade in which the young Billy is all too quickly converted to partake in whatever depravities will yield the best material rewards – not to mention those 'magical' darker events during which his heart and soul become blacker by far than the skins of those innocent wretches whose lives he all too willingly ruins.

By means of this assured and wonderful conceived allegory we follow the English Monster's journey through time until his arrival in Regency London – at which point his seemingly indestructible path will cross with Horton and Harriot – the two men whose hearts are so intent on crushing the horror within their midst.