



The Fire Baby

Jim Kelly

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In the stifling heat wave of June 1976, an American plane crashes on the Cambridgeshire Fens, the point of impact the remote Black Bank Farm. Out of the flames walks a young woman, Maggie Beck, clutching a baby in her arms.

Twenty-seven years later, Maggie is dying. Journalist Philip Dryden knows this because Maggie is lying in the hospital ward next to his wife Laura.

As Maggie prepares to leave this world, Laura---locked in a coma for four years---appears to be slowly returning to it. And for the last few days, she has listened to Maggie's death-bed confession surrounding events on the night of the crash all those years ago.

It's a confession that will blow open the murder story that Dryden is covering. But can Laura somehow communicate to her husband the shocking secrets she has learned?

The Fire Baby Details

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Author : Jim Kelly

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Beth says

The second book in the Philip Dryden series begins with a fire. In the early summer of 1976, Britain is in the grip of a severe drought. Maggie Beck is at home at Black Bank Farm with her parents and her infant son. They are having lunch when a plane from the nearby US airbase crashes into the house, turning the world into a white hot mass. When help arrives, Maggie is walking from the house, carrying an infant in her arms, but the baby is not her baby. Her baby died in the house with her parents. She is carrying an infant wrapped in a blanket marked with USAF: Air Convoy. Maggie Beck was carrying Lyndon Koskinski, the two week old son of a US Airforce captain and his wife, flying to Texas to introduce him to the family. Lyndon was thrown clear and rescued by Maggie who sent him on to the grandparents who were waiting for him.

Twenty-seven years later, in an old army pillbox not far from Black Bank Farm, a man is chained. In front of him, on a shelf, is a glass of water. No matter how hard he tries, he cannot reach the water. It is desperately hot in the pillbox and the man watches the water evaporate. His jailor comes each day and refills the glass. He never speaks and the prisoner never sees his face. The chained man thinks there is something familiar about the man but he can't pin it down. He knows he is dying for lack of water, for the water that is just out of reach. "He'd speak before the end came. He felt sure of that. But he wanted to know now. Know now for which of his crimes he was being punished."

At the Tower Hospital, Philip Dryden visits his wife, Laura, as he does everyday. Now he spends some of the time talking with the woman in the other bed. Maggie Beck is dying. She has cancer and her time is running out. Philip has known Maggie for a long time. When Philip was eleven, his father had died, swept away, his body never found. Maggie has just lost her family and she moved in with the Drydens to help his mother deal with her loss. Maggie tells Philip that she has a story to tell; she has to put things right. Philip brings her a tape recorder and, as Laura listens, Maggie tells her terrible story of secrets and lies.

Away from the hospital, Philip is drawn into other stories horrifyingly common in the twenty-first century. Someone is smuggling illegal immigrants into Cambridgeshire, transporting them in container trucks. As the police close in, the immigrants are being left to die in the containers, locked in without food or water as the temperatures inside soar.

A new supply of pornographic pictures is circulating in the Fens. Young women are being drugged in bars and led away by men who are not known in the area. The women are returned to the town center but they have no memory of the men or the place they were taken. Then one of the women is found dead.

And now, twenty-seven years later, Lyndon Koskinski has returned to Black Bank Farm to meet the woman who rescued him. He is now in the US Air Force, assigned to the same air base as his father had been. Lyndon and Maggie's daughter, Estelle, have become very close, a romance brewing. When Maggie's health suddenly deteriorates, the couple are on holiday. Maggie begs Philip to find them; she must see them before she dies.

Philip, Laura, and Humph (Philip's personal cabbie) are the core of the stories but Jim Kelly creates other characters in each book who carry some of the storytelling duties. The characters in FIRE BABY are formed by secrets and lies, carrying the burdens left by other people's choices. The Dryden series on one of the best.

Gill says

Really enjoyed this book. It starts in 1976 with a Military Plane crashing into a farm shortly after taking off from a US airbase in Cambridgeshire. The only survivors are the farmer's daughter and a baby who had been on the plane. Twenty seven years later the baby, now a USAF pilot, returns to the base. The woman who saved him that night is dying and enlists the help of journalist, Philip Dryden, to tell the story of what really happened the night of the crash. Dryden is also working on stories involving human trafficking, a pornography smuggling ring and a murder begins to find links between them all.

A really good read with some interesting characters especially Humph, the eccentric cabby who acts as Dryden's driver. I'll definitely be looking out for more books in this series.

Cat. says

A week before the accident that put her in a persistent vegetative state, Dryden's wife gave him a key. Now, four years after their accident, Laura is waking up. Kind of: she responds occasionally to questions and has been provided with a machine which she can type out words if she wants. It's a bit like an Ouija board, though, so the messages are often garbled. She now has a roommate, a woman named Maggie Beck, who is dying of cancer but wants to confess her sins to Dryden and to her daughter before she goes. Her confession dovetails with the break in a person-smuggling-and-porn ring based in the area.

Dryden is stuck trying to figure out what the repercussions of her confessions mean to her family after her death. He is also trying to figure out what to do if his wife never actually wakes up. During all of his searches for good copy for the local paper, he compulsively tries his key on every lock he comes across. In the end, no one goes home happy, although there is some sense of contentment and commitment in some parts.

This is not a story that will cheer the reader, nor likely bring tourism to the fens around Ely, but Dryden is an absolutely human and clearly-written character; one can't help but feel for him as he sleepwalks through his days, insisting that he's not a particularly good person.

Kae Cheatham says

I didn't remember this character until I read the front face info and was reminded of the book THE WATER CLOCK -- which I can't really remember. Phil Dryden, reporter for a small newspaper, is pulled into a 30-year old story of betrayal and mistaken identity that ties in with the present-day issue of illegal immigrants. Dryden's wife is unconscious in the hospital (left over from the first book), but communicating slightly.

I found the writing boring and too indulgent--most often cutting into the flow of the story. Transitions were rough. Character portrayals were forced to being obnoxious. Since I couldn't remember the first book, neither author or protagonist. The next time I blunder into a Kelly book, I'll turn it down.

Marilyn F says

Only mildly enthused by this group of characters etc. An okay read.

LJ says

THE FIRE BABY (Unlic. Invest-Philip Dryden-England-Cont) – VG

Kelly, Jim – 2nd in series

St. Martin's Minotaur, 2008, US Hardcover – ISBN: 0-312-32145-7

First Sentence: East of Ely, above the bone-dry peatfields, a great red dust storm drifts across the moon, throwing an amber shadow on the old cathedral.

It starts with a plane crash resulting in a house fire. One baby dies and another survives. It progresses to a dying woman, a comatose wife providing occasional clues, includes smuggling of illegal immigrants, pornography, and a WWII bunker. It all combines into a mystery reporter Philip Dryden feels compelled to solve.

I have rapidly become a fan of Kelly's writing. It takes a touch of work to follow him through the maze of plots and subplots he creates, but it's a very enjoyable journey. I am thoroughly fascinated with his three main characters; Dryden, the journalist and husband; Laura, his comatose wife; and Humph, Dryden's driver who has a ready supply of airplane-sized liquor bottles and listens to foreign language tapes. What I most appreciate is the way Kelly takes all the threads of his story and brings you to a dramatic and satisfying place at the end. I am definitely looking forward to continuing with this author.

Aurelia says

I really liked this 2nd installment of the Philip Dryden series - a much more complex story than the first book. Not the most fast paced mystery series, but the characters are great - I love Philips 'friendship' with Humph (his cab driver).

Deb says

As usual author keeps one in suspense.

Damaskcat says

Philip Dryden is intrigued by Maggie Beck's story. She is one of only two survivors of a plane crash twenty seven years ago. But she has a confession to make before she dies which will change the lives of many people. Dryden - a journalist - promises to tell her story after her death. Maggie is sharing a room with his semi-conscious wife, Laura, who is trying to tell him something which may just be important to his safety and that of others.

This is the second book in the series set in and around Ely in the Fens - a stark and beautiful landscape which

the author really brings to life. I like Dryden as a character and I'm intrigued to see how the author will develop the story of Laura and her disastrous car crash which has totally changed her life and that of her husband.

It is a powerful and well written crime novel which stays with you after you have read the last page. This book could be read as a standalone novel but is probably better read as part of a series so that the reader can follow the development of the series characters.

J Barkess says

I acquired this as part of a Reader's Digest volume. These books used to offer a good selection of reading, unfortunately not in this case.

This book is amongst the most boring I have ever read, there is nothing positive I could say about it. Dreadful plot and unbelievable characters.

Why isn't there an option to leave NO stars? ?

Jennifer says

I am definitely NOT as big a fan of this series by Jim Kelly. The story was good and had many twists but it was written in a semi-confusing manner. There were description passages that seemed unnecessary and then other passages that needed clarity.

M. says

This is the second book in Jim Kelly's series featuring Philip Dryden. I gave *The Water Clock* five stars, as I found it captivating.

I'm not sure why I don't feel the same about *The Fire Baby*. The plot, while complicated, is legitimate and deftly played out. Philip Dryden is still a great lead character, and I still enjoy him. Kelly's prose still crackles with vivid and rich imagery, and his description of the Cambridgeshire Fens is wonderful. So what was the problem?

My one word answer: bleak. This is not a happy book, and there is precious little in the way of a happy ending (although the last page is a gem in that respect). Everything in this book, from Dryden's personal life to the characters and events he encounters, is very negative, often tragic and sometimes twisted. I see why; there is a very strong and honest message in this book about how the choice made by one person can affect so many lives as a pebble falling into a quiet pond sends ripples in all directions. To make that point apparently required a very dark canvas.

I will visit with Dryden again, though...it is very difficult not to care a bit for this character!

Monica says

I very much enjoyed this second book in Jim Kelly's series featuring Philip Dryden. It's interesting reading a crime/mystery from a journalist's point of view rather than first hand from police or a detective. Not that Dryden doesn't get his hands dirty when it comes to solving a mystery! In this second book Dryden's nemesis is fire (in the first series book it was water). The flow of Kelly's book is fast and keeps the pages turning. Kelly, just like most European mystery writer's, develops a plot and murders that are "locally based". The characters involved in the story are intertwined both in past and present. I like non-sensational murder and crime that has a back story.

Megan Deppe says

I don't know if it was the writing style or the British lingo that I didn't understand or just the fact that the title of the story was way more interesting than the rest of it, but it was actually really hard for me to finish this one.

Gary Van Cott says

Rather depressing overall. Nothing good happens to any of the characters. The most annoying part for me is that it is filled with egregious errors about the US Air Force. Almost everything the author says about Air Force combat history, personnel, aircraft, uniforms etc. is incorrect. As an example the first Air Force character introduced is a major who has received a purple heart (the US decoration for being wounded in combat) in Korea. Since the Korean War ended in 1953 this character would have to be at least in his 70s (the book was published in 2003 and takes place around that time). There are so many other problems like this that could have been fixed by someone like myself in 30 minutes, I can't understand why this wasn't done. It would not have interfered with the story.
