

A Hangman for Ghosts

Andrei Baltakmens

Top Five Books (Jul 1, 2018)

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Set in the roiling, corrupt world of an 1829 prison colony, Andrei Baltakmens's *A Hangman for Ghosts* is a historical mystery that brings regency-era Australia to life.

Gabriel Carver, the hangman of Sydney, is a dark, lonely figure. Soaked in rum and regret, Carver becomes an unlikely detective when a woman from his past is accused of murder. As Carver follows the clues through Sydney's underbelly, he encounters a cast of bleakly Dickensian characters, from whistling streetwalkers to baby-faced policemen. As he works to solve the murder, the mystery of Carver's own origins unravels as well. With rich historical details that evoke Australia's early colonial days, this is a wonderful, traditional novel.

A Hangman For Ghosts is Baltakmens's second novel. With a PhD in English literature with a focus on Dickens, he's well versed in his subject, but the Sydney that Carver stalks through is neither dry nor academic. Baltakmens depicts a filthy, unpredictable, densely populated society where transported convicts mix with sailors and "fallen women." Descriptions have a dreamlike quality, as though seen through antique glass: a woman is "too bright, fatally bright, for her skirts were on fire, a river of flame in the dark."

The novel does lean a bit on the Dickensian tradition, and some chapters feel repetitive, as though serialized; however, the mystery's thread keeps spinning at a satisfying pace. Folding in vivid details, bright characters, and compelling dialogue, the story is a page-turner, a savory treat to be devoured.

This delightfully grim historical mystery is true to Dickens's style, and holds on to its secrets with tight, clammy fists.

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