

Infants of the Brush: A Chimney Sweep's Story

A. M. Watson

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Infants of the Brush is a captivating, emotional story that speaks to the powerful will to survive.

A novel about indentured boys who fight to earn five guineas for their freedom, *Infants of the Brush: A Chimney Sweep's Story* enlivens 1720s London. A. M. Watson's outstanding, immersive debut portrays the broomers whose hopes hang in the balance.

The book reimagines characters surrounding *Armory vs Delamirie*, a case in which a chimney sweep brought a jewel for appraisal to a shop, only to be refused the return of the jewel when he disagreed with its stated worth. The real-life sweep becomes the fictional Egan Whitcombe, a six-year-old at the novel's start, who is sold when his father dies. His journey comprises the main thread around which other plot strands converge, culminating in the court's ruling on finder's rights and personal property that changes Egan's life.

Lucid chapters shift between Armory, the plaintiff and master chimney sweep who buys Egan; Egan and his fellow broomers; and Lamerie, the silversmith whose apprentice is accused of theft. Scenes that feature the young outcasts—some from orphanages or workhouses, others sold—reveal the cruelty of their jobs alongside their invisibility. Choice descriptions paint the terror of climbing chimneys, the consequences of coming up short in their daily payments to their master, and the punishments that Armory inflicts. Bleak as child labor is, the story never entirely darkens, wisely refraining from making the broomers poster boys for an era's social ills.

The book also avoids painting the boys as picaresque imps. A humane, affecting approach makes their fate palpable. Their spirited individuality shines through in colorful, period dialogue. In careful strokes, each is given a backstory and hopes for the future.

Sleeping in Armory's cellar, left to scrape for their quotas, often starving and whipped, the boys comprise a brotherhood born of circumstance and sustained by need. Two especially stand out: Thomas Pitt, a thoughtful teen who assumes a protective role, and Egan, whom Thomas takes under his wing. Pitt is drawn as a principled boy whose guidance provides an anchor. Egan transforms from a frightened, unwilling recruit to a boy gripped by the realization that, despite help from others, he is still alone in many ways, and must find a way out of servitude himself.

The boys are given reprieves through the kindness of strangers, including a church's parishioners, and through the seasonal nature of their job. Sections that explore their summer away from Armory's brutality highlight how much they depend on one another. When tragedy hits, the event is timed in such a way that Egan is forced to take charge of his future.

Far from romanticizing London's underbelly, *Infants of the Brush* turns the boys' risks into a captivating, emotional story that speaks to the powerful will to survive.

KAREN RIGBY (July 25, 2018)

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