

The Conviction of Cora Burns

Carolyn Kirby

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Carolyn Kirby's *The Conviction of Cora Burns* finds twenty-year-old Cora Burns desperate to discover what's hidden in her memory's shadows. It's 1885, and she's a child of the system. Raised in the Union workhouse, transferred to the Borough Lunatic Asylum as a laundry maid, then sentenced to Birmingham Gaol for attempted infanticide, she's suspicious when she's offered employment in the house of Mr. Jerwood, a man of science who photographs convicts. But she accepts because she needs time and means to find her only childhood friend, Alice Salt, so that, finally, all might be well.

The novel probes some of Victoriana's darkest corners. Kirby uses the ties between early scientific and medical research, prisons, lunatic asylums, and workhouses to humanize the vulnerability of the poor, especially women and children. Once a person goes through any of these doors, the die is cast. Their life permanently changes in ways they have little control over and even less hope of escaping.

In a novel that deftly illustrates so many social horrors, Kirby delivers a complicated picture of Cora that defies easy characterization. Although Cora helms the novel, its point of view splits between multiple first-person narrators to reveal the layered implications of her tragedy. She is neither wholly good or bad, sane or insane, altruistic or self-serving; questions about her likability, sanity, and motivations hover, giving Cora complexity and depth.

The suspicion and risk that permeate Cora's few choices reveal the disproportionate power accorded to the wealthy and to men, even when their deeds display wanton inhumanity. Although historical fiction is always a reconstruction, something of the present projected onto the past, *The Conviction of Cora Burns* makes plain the frightening ease by which Victorian practices lay bare our own.

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