

★ **The Hopkins Conundrum: A Tragic Comedy about Gerard Manley Hopkins and Five Shipwrecked Nuns**

Simon Edge

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A tragicomedy that slips through time and space circling various characters whose lives are loosely unified by Gerard Manley Hopkins's "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*," *The Hopkins Conundrum* is sprinkled with unique history, sharp observation, and the absurdity of the ordinary. A stunning new voice, Simon Edge crafts a send-up that both masters and subverts genre conventions to reveal a unique point of view and a warm, beating heart.

A composite narrative, *The Hopkins Conundrum* links the stories of present-day publican Tim Cleverly, businesswoman and Hopkins fan Chloe Benson, thriller writer Barry Brook, Jesuit priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and five German nuns traveling aboard the *Deutschland* in 1875.

Edge makes good use of little-known literary and historical territory to mine convergences, tying them together with the freedom of fiction. Because the wreck of the *Deutschland* doesn't hold the same cultural memory as, say, that of the *Titanic*, Edge's exploration of this history through a group of five nuns aboard ship has real stakes, as does Hopkins's struggle to find himself in the subsumption of poetry and piety. What emerges is a worthy historical thriller in its own right.

Yet amidst Edge's piercingly keen insights and characterization is always humor. While the historical narrative probes the dark humor of real lives, the modern narrative explores with a gentle humor the deep flaws of everyday life. Tim's sad-sack musings, and a singular customer (complete with flatulent dog) and the odd partnership they forge as Tim attempts to keep his failing pub—and love life—afloat are undeniably hilarious.

The improbable tangle of Tim, Chloe, and Barry Brook snowballs as Tim's get-rich-quick scheme threatens to cost him everything worth keeping. This modern-day farce almost balances the poignancy of Hopkins and the nuns, but, as Edge himself says, "Emphasis on the 'almost'—let's not get carried away."

Filled with rich, distinct characters, each story line in *The Hopkins Conundrum* is strong in its own right, but the novel blossoms into something more in Edge's sure hand. The union of these stories is magical, a contiguity that lifts the book into something rare and special.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (Debut Fiction 2017)

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