



The House on Vesper Sands

Paraic O'Donnell

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In Paraic O'Donnell's chilling mystery novel, *The House on Vesper Sands*, a young student and a sharp-witted detective are swept up by a sinister threat to the working class.

Naïve, overeducated divinity student Gideon Bliss rushes to his uncle's house in London after receiving a cryptic letter. He arrives late, but finds momentary respite from the bad weather in a nearby church, where a young woman babbles about brightness and dark air. But then Gideon is attacked, and the woman—a childhood friend—disappears.

Gideon talks his way into working with Inspector Cutter to delve into his friend's disappearance, and into the fate of a seamstress who stitched words into her flesh before leaping to her death out of her wealthy employer's home. The mystery deepens as rumors of shadows that seek poor young women as sacrifices spread, leading Gideon and Cutter to an unlikely ally: Octavia, a headstrong journalist who bucks social conventions.

The book defies genre classifications. At first blush, it's a Victorian-era murder mystery, but as the plot zips along, it picks up elements of a supernatural thriller, a social commentary, and a literary drama. But despite its eerie atmosphere and unsettling development, there's also a strong undercurrent of humor throughout. The mismatched pair of Cutter and Gideon provide most of the comical touches, and Cutter's witty retorts elicit hearty chuckles.

Transitions between scenes are deft, subtly pointing out of moral quandaries or expounding on the historical setting. Astonishing details are splashed across the pages, as when a sunset is described with attentive descriptions of its colors, including pewter, ash, syrup, and rosewood.

The House on Vesper Sands is an atmospheric mystery that casts a keen eye on power imbalances and gender inequality.

JOHN M. MURRAY (January / February 2021)

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