

The Lady and the Highwayman

Sarah M. Eden

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A headmistress moonlights as an author and meets her match in Sarah M. Eden's delightful Victorian romance, *The Lady and the Highwayman*.

The novel pairs savvy Elizabeth with former urchin-cum-writer Fletcher. When Fletcher learns that Mr. King—Elizabeth's pseudonym—is cornering the penny dreadful market, he tries to unmask him. Meanwhile, Elizabeth is intrigued by the Dread Penny Society that Fletcher and his peers joined to save the vulnerable from London's underbelly and that fuels rumors among the literati.

An animated plot volleys between Elizabeth hiding her alter ego while sussing out the truth about the Society; Fletcher's rescues; and their serialized fiction, which unfolds in clever installments that mirror what they experience in real life and that showcase their individual styles.

Despite their differences, the talented leads share a passion for social justice. Their romance is restrained and comes out through playful dialogue. Elizabeth's game outlook and willingness to help others make her a winsome schoolmarm who subverts convention. Fletcher straddles lines, displaying both the sharp instincts that he honed in his youth and his recent middle class leanings, and the combination is heartening.

Street scenes portray the Dread Penny Society's sly, coordinated movements, conveying their mystique as they face peril. The cruelty of the 1860s is hinted at through the plight of children, but the book focuses more on lighter, adventuresome heroics. Real-life villains dovetail with the monster in Fletcher's fiction, revealing his influences.

For Elizabeth, art also imitates life and life brings about unexpected change. When her role as Mr. King is made clear, it's a gratifying moment that proves her mettle and makes the thrilling twists and moody escapism of the penny dreadful worthwhile.

A novel highlighting hidden lives and how love is emboldening, *The Lady and the Highwayman's* like-minded couple helps others find freedom.

KAREN RIGBY (September / October 2019)

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