

## The Raven's Seal: A Historical Mystery

**Andrei Baltakmens**

Top Five Books (Nov 1, 2012)

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How can one not like characters who are “encumbered by education and no fortune,” or who, when asked if they are drunk, describe their condition as being “a little short of the high mark of sobriety”? Such are but two of the many colorful and engaging Dickensian denizens of the grim eighteenth-century English city of Airenchester, a place doomed to labor under the twin shadows of “the old Bellstrom Gaol” and a secretive, criminal mastermind known as “The Black Claw.”

With his PhD in English literature firmly in hand, Andrei Baltakmens gives readers of *The Raven's Seal* all of the history and the mystery his subtitle promises. The mood, color, details, and dialogue come across as very authentic, and without the feeling of being forced that so often weighs down historical novels, let alone mysteries set in historical periods. Baltakmens's characters would not be out of place in a work of DeFoe or Thackeray. In fact, there is much of the latter's *Barry Lyndon* here, with its plots and duels and confidence games, as well as deft touches of the former's *Moll Flanders*, with its bawdy wenches, prison intrigues, and period squalor.

Baltakmens describes his scenes, settings, and characters very well, and has them speak in period speech. His dialogue is crisp, and while laced with period terms and mannerisms, remains easy on the ear of a modern audience. The plot is solid if a bit plodding at times, especially in the overlong second and third of the four “books” into which he has divided his novel, but there are enough high points even in those sections to bring back anyone who starts to nod off.

There are at least two mysteries in the novel, one of which most readers should be able to solve well before Baltakmens's characters learn of and reveal the solution, notably the identity of “The Black Claw.” The other mystery, the answer to the whodunit, is much less obvious yet well explained in the final exposition.

The best parts of the novel are those set in the gaol, which “crouched above the fine city of Airenchester like a black spider on a heap of spoils.” Eighteenth-century jailers acted much like disinterested yet highly corruptible innkeepers who let the inmates run the place, provided they would “pay your way,” as Bellstrom's “gaoler Swinge” explains to the hero, Thaddeus Grainger, on the first day of his incarceration for a crime he did not commit. The “society” behind its walls has its own rules, and even its own court of law, as the “eminence” of the jail, the pensive chess master Ravenscraigh, enlightens the hero.

There are highwaymen and whores, rakes and rascals, maids and maidens, and corruptible officials and incorruptible friends aplenty in *The Raven's Seal*, and while there is perhaps too much talking and not enough action, there is something in it for almost everyone who likes a good eighteenth-century tale, and one with a mystery to keep the story moving.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (October 17, 2012)

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