

"Devoured" reviewed by Bev H on June 22, 2013

Updated June 25, 2013

Book Title:

Devoured

Author:

M. E. Meredith

Why did you read it? Why did you finish it? Who would you recommend it to?:

I read this because I had seen many reviews of it online. The mystery begins with the death of Lady Katherine Bessingham--a bohemian and a free-thinker, who collects specimens and fossils and who subscribes to the rather dangerous new theories of evolution. Inspector Adams, the well-known hotshot detective from Scotland Yard, calls in Adolphus Hatton and his morgue assistant Albert Roumande--two early forensic practitioners--to examine the crime scene and perform the autopsy. Their investigations will take them from the sewing room work house where fine lady's garments are created by the extreme poor to the well-appointed rooms of the wealthy; from the shop of an out-of-the-way bookseller to the British Museum. The story alternates between a narrative of current events in London and letters written while one of the main characters was on a specimen-collecting journey in Borneo. It becomes clear that the events which took place in Malaysia are firmly tied to the spate murders that have thinned the ranks of Britain's scientific community. But are the radical views held by these botanists and specimen-collectors really the catalyst? Or is there a more basic motive driving this killer who seems able to stay one step ahead of the police and the forensic investigators? This one is a bit of a mixed bag for me. It is quite obviously a well-researched novel. Lots of excellent detail about the period--particularly the conditions for the working poor. The letters detailing Ben Broderig's trip are quite interesting (if a bit heavy at times with descriptions of various collectors pouncing on specimens and rattling off the Latin names....). The premise is an interesting one...but a bit unevenly told. And I quite liked the motive behind the murders (well...most of the murders...but an explanation of what I mean by that would be a thundering spoiler). BUT I don't like the protagonists much. I particularly don't like Inspector Adams....for such a celebrated detective, he's awful slow on the uptake. It seems evident that he didn't rise in the force based on his skill and the second half of the novel would seem to bear this out. Hatton and Roumande could have been more interesting if their forensic detective work had been given more scope. It seemed to me that most of the time they were just brought along to show how non-effectual Adams really is without moving the investigation along nearly as much as they should. The denouement shows them in their best light--but more as men of action than as men of science. All in all, a decent debut novel that is solid enough to make me interested in reading the next installment (The Devil's Ribbon). I hope that Meredith builds on the strengths of her debut and I hope to see Hatton and Roumande used more effectively in their chosen profession.

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