

“You’re not gonna believe this! Jack the Ripper in Fiction”

– By Matt Leyshon

Jack the Ripper has always been a polarizing figure. As there are many suspects as well as theories, the world remains on the hunt for the truth and a jury of millions is yet to make a unanimous decision.

To express interest in the case is to show a desire for seeking truth. Many forums are available for truth seekers including books, movies, television shows, websites, libraries and many other sources to learn more about the case. Jack the Ripper is one of the most documented figures in history and that is because Jack is easily one of the most compelling.

When a subject such as this case nurtures a huge appetite for details, and truth, the works of fiction involving Jack the Ripper are a much harder sell. As soon as we see “the F word” we are aware that whatever this source it is not entirely fact, and that is enough for many to end their interest there. But . . . can works of fiction involving Jack hold a place and be relevant where the case is concerned? To me the answer is yes, but that is not without condition.

For many if you ask them “what got you into the case in the first place”, many will answer with a work of fiction. In my case it was the Michael Caine series, which I am still a huge fan of. While it’s theory hasn’t aged well and there are specifics within the show that are not entirely accurate, there is however a lot of this show that IS accurate and is a terrific depiction of the events in the Autumn of 1888. Even among the staunchest of Ripper experts, this is still a favorite.

There are works of fiction that are not held in the same regard though. When works of Ripper fiction have been roundly criticized there is typically a common denominator. Inaccuracy. The greater the straying from truth, the harsher the analysis. Many works of fiction incorporate Jack the Ripper into it as a means of making their book interesting and not investing appropriately in the case. I refer to it as “taking Jack’s name in vain”. People who care about this case also care about details and a lack of research is a punishable offense. If the simple things are missed then the big things are also missed.

On the flip side of this are many works of Ripper fiction that have illustrated the proper level of

care and attention to detail. An appreciation of the truth being more interesting than fiction, being an underlying theme that is clear and well demonstrated. However writing a fictional piece, yet adhering to facts, becomes a challenge in which a writer must not come across as simply regurgitating research and their depiction of the Whitechapel murders appearing no different to a textbook. I have always maintained that people/readers always prefer to breathe fresh air and not recycled. The other challenge in Jack the Ripper fiction is finding a new perspective, a new way of telling the story that is interesting and appealing.

Yet people still enjoy a tale. Many readers love a good yarn that involves Jack the Ripper in it, especially if it is capable of taking you back, place you in Whitechapel, and make you experience the case, its crimes, its victims (and their lives), as well as the period. If a work of Ripper fiction can demonstrate the above qualities, and wrap the Jack the Ripper folklore into an enjoyable story then it has a chance of being accepted, maybe even embraced. It could potentially introduce new fans, readers, researchers and can also provide an outlet to people that remain entrenched in the rabbit hole on a daily basis, with an escape that is enjoyable but not a total departure.

Ripper fiction will always be a necessary evil and will always be connected to the case. How that work is received, in my opinion, rests largely on how that body of work pays homage to the case as well as sticking to the facts. The ultimate respect a piece a Ripper work of fiction can pay is to ironically include as much truth about the case as possible. There it where the true fascination lies and both sides should be sharing it.