Things actually seem to be looking up for that chronically tormented Elizabethan theater company known as Westfields Men. As the curtain rises on Edward Marston's exuberant The Counterfeit Crank, the cast has welcomed into their midst an oddly secretive but nonetheless talented new playwright, who brings with him a rousing historical drama, Caesars Fall. Meanwhile, Alexander Marwood, the gloomy, henpecked landlord of the Queens Head, that London inn where Westfields Men are begrudgingly permitted to perform, has gone to visit his ailing brother (whom he hopes will remember him in his will), leaving the hostelry in the care of a more appreciative and exuberant manager. Fortune has smiled on us at last, exults Westfields veteran dramatist, Edmund Hoode. Ah, but those words have hardly been uttered before a plague of gambling debts spreads among the actors--the result of their engagement with beguiling card sharp Philomen Lavery--and Hoode's health declines precipitously, dashing any chance of his completing a promised lighthearted comedy. Adding insult to injury, the troupe's costumes are pilfered and its ticket proceeds pinched. Though Nicholas Bracewell, Westfields book holder and necessarily practiced troubleshooter, hopes to rout all these woes, he is over-stretched, having also volunteered to aid a fetching, naïve young con artist who has survived abduction by the lecherous operators of a workhouse for the poor, but whose Welsh boyfriend has now gone missing. Deceived by people he saw as friends, and pursued by some of the very malefactors he aims to vanquish, Bracewell must marshal his considerable skills--both as a detective and a thespian--to save his livelihood, not to mention his own life. British fictionist Marston has created other historical series in recent years, including those about a pair
of 11th-century Domesday researchers (introduced in The Wolves of Savernake) and about 1850s London Inspector Robert Colbeck (who debuted in The Railway Detective). Yet he owes his popularity most to the Bracewell books, of which The Counterfeit Crank is the 14th (after 2003’s The Vagabond Clown). While this novel offers a couple plot twists that are obvious from the outset, and more than one secondary character lacks the nuances essential to believability, there’s no sign that Marston’s regular cadre of 16th-century entertainers—each more egotistical or eccentric than the last—has been wrung dry of the possibilities for humor and hardship. --J. Kingston Pierce

My Personal Review:
In Elizabethan England the acting troupe of Westfields Men is having their share of woes. Playwright Edmund Hoode has taken ill and it is up to his protégée Michael Grammaticus to finish the new play the actors are to perform. Michael is so grateful to his mentor for his support that he pays for the doctor and the special food he prescribes. A card player Alexander Marwood entices some of Westfields Men into a game of cards with him. More times than not he is the winner, but there is no evidence that he is cheating but bookholder Nicholas Bracewell has his suspicions.

Someone steals the take for a play and their best costumes; nobody has a clue who is behind the thefts. Two young beggars who Nicholas befriended end up at Bridewells workhouse where Dorothea is raped before she is released and her best friend Hywell is killed for his righteous attempt to hunt down the people who run the workhouse. Nicholas is determined to bring those responsible for the boys death to justice as well as a couple of thieves who thought Westfields Men were easy pickings.

Readers get a taste what it was like for actors who have the backing of a lord in Elizabethan England. Nicholas Bracewell is more heroic than usual as he tries to right many wrongs by bringing thieves and killers to justice. THE COUNTERFEIT CRANK is an exciting historical mystery and readers will be delighted to become reacquainted with characters they have come to regard as friends as it is always a treat to read about the endearing Westfields Men.

Harriet Klausner

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