The Fourth Bear: A Nursery Crime

Jack Spratt and Mary Mary return in their second adventure from the inimitable Jasper Fforde. Five years ago, Viking introduced Jasper Fforde and his upsidedown, inside-out literary crime masterpieces. And as they move from Thursday Next to Jack Spratt’s Nursery Crimes, his audience is insatiable and growing. Now, with The Fourth Bear, Jack Spratt and Mary Mary take on their most dangerous case so far as a murderous cookie stalks the streets of Reading. The Gingerbreadman—psychopath, sadist, genius, and killer—is on the loose. But it isn’t Jack Spratt’s case. He and Mary Mary have been demoted to Missing Persons following Jack’s poor judgment involving the poisoning of Mr. Bun the baker. Missing Persons looks like a boring assignment until a chance encounter leads them into the hunt for missing journalist Henrietta Goldy Hatchett, star reporter for The Daily Mole. Last to see her alive? The Three Bears, comfortably living out a life of rural solitude in Andersen’s wood. But all is not what it seems. How could the bears’ porridge be at such disparate temperatures when they were poured at the same time? Why did Mr. and Mrs. Bear sleep in separate beds? Was there a fourth bear? And if there was, who was he, and why did he try to disguise Goldy’s death as a freak accident? Jack answers all these questions and a few others besides, rescues Mary Mary from almost certain death, and finally meets the Fourth Bear and the Gingerbreadman face-to-face.

My Personal Review:
Detective Inspector Jack Spratt and Detective Sergeant Mary Mary return in their second adventure by author Jasper Fforde, which builds off the events of The Big Over Easy while at the same time avoiding repeating the chief themes of that novel. Fforde has conjured up an elaborate fantastical world in this series of novels, and it is a delight to return to it (he has spoken of a third and final Nursery Crime story at some point in the future, which I highly anticipate).
Solving the murder of Humpty Dumpty made Jack Spratt famous, but, as the new book opens, he has fallen somewhat, thanks to a couple of botched operations, most notably his failure in the Red Riding Hood case, which left both Red and her grandmother catatonic. He is told to attend a psychiatric evaluation, which he fervently would rather avoid, even as a young reporter with golden hair turns up dead at a Battle of the Somme theme park (Somme World, which is designed to mortify anyone who goes there), hours after she was discovered naked in bed at the Bruin household. Who killed Goldilocks, and why? Included here are, among other amusing details, the reasons why the story of the smallest bowl being just right doesn't hold water, and what that indicates.

Fforde is not content to hit the same notes that made The Big Over Easy so entertaining, which some may see as a negative, depending on what you think about what he chooses to replace it with. The first novel made a great deal of the fictional universes obsession with true crime stories, and the effect this had on police procedure, but this angle is more or less absent from The Fourth Bear. There is no sense that the characters are spending their time trying to be more dramatic; Briggs, Jack's police captain, has seemingly gone from a self-aware parody of the trope where police captains are always suspending their officers to merely another example of that trope played straight (albeit with every referring to Plot Device Number _ in reference to various strategies and situations they find themselves in). Playing the story a bit more straight adds a bit more straight-up drama to the story, though Fforde has not toned down his trademark irreverence one bit.

This approach also allows for some real exploration of the characters in a non-satirical context, and both Jack and Mary get a lot of good development here. Jack's concerns one of the intriguing new angles Fforde introduces here: a more thorough explanation of the existence of fictional characters in the real world, and how they differ from normal humans. Jack is a PDR (Person of Dubious Reality), but seems to be fairly well-adjusted, while he is able to call out his psychiatrist on being a threadbare plot device who has no backstory or memories outside what the author has supplied her with (which is emotionally devastating).

Fforde casts his net quite wide in terms of source material, reeling in not just Southey's characters but far more obscure ones such as Mr and Mrs. Punch (British puppets who I suspect non-Brits such as myself will find rather mystifying); and the entire mystery revolves around various figures from Edward Lears The Quangle Wangles Hat, which I had never heard of before, but numerous important plot details are drawn from it (one might consider reading that poem before reading this).

All in all, another winner from Fforde.