The School of Night: A Novel by Louis Bayard

A Beautiful, Powerful Masterpiece.

An ancient mystery, a lost letter, and a timeless love unleash a long-buried web of intrigue that spans four centuries.

In the late sixteenth century, five brilliant scholars gather under the cloak of darkness to discuss God, politics, astronomy, and the black arts. Known as the School of Night, they meet in secret to avoid the wrath of Queen Elizabeth. But one of the men, Thomas Harriot, has secrets of his own, secrets he shares with one person only: the servant woman he loves.

In modern-day Washington, D.C., disgraced Elizabethan scholar Henry Cavendish has been hired by the ruthless antiquities collector Bernard Styles to find a missing letter. The letter dates from the 1600s and was stolen by Henry's close friend, Alonzo Wax. Now Wax is dead and Styles wants the letter back.

But the letter is an object of interest to others, too. It may be the clue to a hidden treasure; it may contain the long-sought formula for alchemy; it most certainly will prove the existence of the group of men whom Shakespeare dubbed the School of Night but about whom little is known. Joining Henry in his search for the letter is Clarissa Dale, a mysterious woman who suffers from visions that only Henry can understand. In short order, Henry finds himself stumbling through a secretive world of ancient perils, caught up in a deadly plot, and ensnared in the tragic legacy of a forgotten genius.

Features:
* ISBN13: 9780805090697
* Condition: New
Add this to your list of conspiracy theories: Sir Walter Raleigh, Christopher Marlowe, George Chapman and Thomas Harriot, 17th century luminaries of literature and science, met secretly in order to discuss their shared philosophy of atheism, a topic impossible to speak of openly in Elizabethan era England. And they call themselves the School of Night.

Did this group exist, did they all know each other, much less meet on a regular basis? No one knows for sure. There is no hard evidence for any of it but, like the Shakespeare authorship question, makes for interesting speculation.

Proponents of the theory believe there are hints written into the works of Shakespeare, barbed references to what would have been a subversive movement. The smoking gun is in Loves Labours Lost, Act IV, Scene III, Black is the badge of hell / The hue of dungeons and the school of night. Not being an Elizabethan scholar, that seems like as weak as evidence gets.

Louis Bayard's The School of Night uses this Elizabethan mystery as the backdrop for his latest book, intertwining a modern day story of two book collectors eager to lay hands on proof the group existed with the 17th century story of scientist Thomas Harriot, a neglected scientist given no credit for having been way ahead of his time.

In the modern storyline a failed Elizabethan scholar, Henry Cavendish, friend of wealthy book collector Alonzo Wax, team up - along with a woman of indeterminate motivation, Clarissa Dale - in a game of cat and mouse with another collector, Bernard Styles, and his Scandinavian tough man, Halldor. Their goal? To decipher a mysterious letter that seems to point toward a hidden cache of Elizabethan treasure, uniting the half of the letter they know exists with the other, which promises to reveal all. And, wherever they travel, people have the inconvenient habit of dying.

Meanwhile, in the 17th century Thomas Harriot works in his laboratory, doing what it is scientists do. And devising a method to hide a vast fortune? Well, we dont know that yet, now, do we.

Bayard, unlike many historical novelists, uses a generous sprinkling of humor in his prose. When I first encountered it I was startled, expecting a much more serious tone based on the cover blurb. I wasnt sure I liked it, feeling alienated as Bayards tongue-in-cheek humor kept pulling me out of the story. I cant say at what point that changed, but Im glad it did. Once the characters were well-established the humor fit each quite well, and I came to not only appreciate but also anticipate it.
This was a book I enjoyed picking up after having left off, though not one I was impatient about resuming. In the interest of full disclosure, historical fiction really isn't my main reading interest. The uncertainty as to what's real and what's fiction bothers me too much to know how to process these novels. Normally, suspending disbelief is not a problem, but in this case it is.

The School of Night held my interest and kept me reading. After the initial problem assimilating the humor, I got into the story with much better attention. I grew to like the characters, though the plot remained a stumbling block til the end.

Speaking of the end... Ack. I realize it's hard tying up loose ends, clipping off the excess, making a tidy package of not just one but two complex plots. But. How do I put this. It's the authors job. In this case, one not done particularly well. Too much unnecessary information, too over the top. After having grown to enjoy the book, along comes an incredibly disappointing, even ridiculous ending.

Question: Where was the editor? Ack.

Would I recommend the book? Obviously, my feelings are mixed. On the one hand, if you love historical fiction, especially the 17th century, there's some of that here. Perhaps not as much as the reader would like, considering the plot pops backward and forward in time repeatedly. Characterization was strong, as was the quality of the prose. The plot... Well, it was there, but the strong characters easily dominated.

Definitely not my strongest recommendation. In fact, I can't guarantee devotees of literary fiction could make it through to the end. Nor, once there, that they don't feel like chasing me down with torches in order to inflict harm on my person for not outright declaring it a wretched read. Well, it's not wretched, but let's just say if I had it to read over again... I wouldn't.

- Lisa Guidarini, NBCC

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