John Huffam is sure the tall man's beard is false. He's sure of little else in November 1849, the year he is fourteen, the year his father is sentenced to London's Whitecross Street Prison. Maybe the man following John -- who claims to be one Inspector Copperfield -- can explain why. Surely, Pa isn't prepared to reveal the truth, any more than the jovial bailiff, Mr. Tuckum, who knows something, but remains mum. Or the little Frenchman, Mr. Farquatt, who courts John's sister but seems most keen on Pa work at the Naval Ordinance Office. Or Mr. O'Doul, the Irishman who insists Pa owes him the unimaginable sum of three hundred pounds. Or what of the one-legged, single-mindedly fierce Sergeant Muldspon, John's teacher? What about the boys great-great-aunt, Lady Euphemia Huffam, who could pay the debt but won't for reasons of her own? What about the secretive Mr. Snugsbe of All Hallows Church, who hides himself away in the City's most voluminous coat? Then there's Chief Inspector Ratchet of Scotland Yard, who is after somebody for some crime or other. True, John has a new friend and ally in Sary the Sneak... but what has even she got up her sleeve? What John learns on his own is that there's a traitor on the loose, somewhere. And he must uncover the villain -- no matter who it might be.

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My Personal Review:
THE TRAITORS' GATE is everything you'd expect from an Avi novel--a well-realized historical adventure, plenty of suspense, and lots of surprises along the way. Whether you're intrigued by Victorian England, you like a good mystery, or you're just looking for a book that will keep you guessing right until the final chapter, you'll find something to enjoy here.

It is the mystery of THE TRAITORS' GATE that will keep readers turning the pages. If 14-year-old John Huffam wants to save his family from destitution, he must find a scheming traitor, who engineered his father's
arrest in order to force Mr. Huffam to sell the military secrets he has memorized. Unfortunately for John, he has more suspects than he can count, and every piece of information he learns raises as many questions as answers. Even with the help of a Scotland Yard inspector and a scruffy street girl who knows all the secrets of London, the task seems close to impossible. Yet John pushes on, through multiple twists and turns, to an ending that is satisfying yet unpredictable.

Underneath the mystery, however, there is a lot more to the story. At heart, it is a tale of lost innocence and growing up. John must come to terms with the fact that many of the adults in his life, including his father, are deeply flawed. It is up to him to choose: allow himself to sink to the levels of his role models, or do his best to hold himself above them and be the best person he can be, despite his circumstances. He must also decide who to turn away from, and, more importantly, who to forgive. For nothing in THE TRAITORS' GATE is completely black and white. Every character has virtues as well as vices, and most are simply doing what they think is best for them, with believable (if not always sympathetic) motives. This depth with stick with readers long after they’ve discovered the answer to the mystery.

Making the story even more engaging is the vivid depiction of Victorian London. Descriptions are full of detail and life. Readers will feel as though they’ve taken a trip there rather than just reading about it. Avi reveals the full range of London experiences, from the lush homes of the rich to the squalid rooms of the very poor, and everything in between. Though some of the laws and customs of this period will be unfamiliar to readers, explanations are easily worked into the story as John learns things about his society even he didn't realize.

If you have a chance to pick this one up, don't hesitate. THE TRAITORS' GATE will stir the mind and the heart equally, and entertain readers along the way.

Reviewed by: Lynn Crow

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