

## REVIEW: The Last Witchfinder by James Morrow

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The Last Witchfinder – James Morrow

Hachette Livre Phoenix, 2007

564 pages

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Reviewed by Lev Lafayette

This is, to put simply, a brilliant piece of historical fiction that combines fact and theme, poetic license and in-depth knowledge. As the title suggests, the story is set in the seventeenth century. The heroine of the story, Jennet Stearn, daughter of the Witchfinder General, learns natural philosophy from her aunt, Isobel, who is eventually executed as a witch. A young Jennet takes the opportunity to swear an oath to herself to end the statute of witchcraft, as her father is sent to the colonies (as Isobel was a “lady”) as both punishment and “reward”. He soon finds himself embroiled in hunting down Satanists in the rather famous township of Salem.

Members of the indigenous population abduct Jennet and she spends several years among the Algonquins until rescued by one Tobias Crompton, a postmaster with grand but rather prosaic ambitions. Jennet continues her research against the Witchcraft Act through the delightfully entitled “Sufficiency of the World”, inspired by the works of Issac Newton who, at least in this history, has “come out of the closet” in terms of his Unitarian religion. Not alone in that small but influential sect (no prizes for guessing the author’s own perspective, let alone that of this reviewer), Jennet also manages to start a relationship with the young Benjamin Franklin. Returning from a visit to Sir Newton, they are shipwrecked upon a Caribbean island and eventually find their way back to the colonies.

Thinking that she has sufficient evidence against the Act, Jennet arranges for herself to be put on trial for witchcraft (woman, lives alone, has lots of cats, grows strange herbs) and is defended by a figure no less than the Baron de Montesquieu. But the court is, to the say the least, somewhat rigged by a hanging judge and superstitious locals.

This brief description of the narrative does not do justice to the richness of the text. Apart the evident excellent research in the setting, the wild yet sufficiently plausible narrative, the text is also presented with a wonderful style. It is written with some of the language and jargon of the seventeenth century, but only just enough for the flavour, rather than being overly authentic and unreadable to most. It is often delightfully funny, contains just enough French to keep francophiles charmed, includes colourful minor characters (like Dr. Cavendish and his ‘Museum of Wondrous Prodigies’), and narrative interludes by Sir Issac Newton’s Principa Mathematica, debating the relative fortunes and losses between reason and madness since publication. All the major characters truly develop over the course of the story (as they should – it spans a lifetime), and with some surprising responses to moments of crisis.

Historical fiction is a favoured genre of mine, and this is a particularly good example of what can be done with it. It takes the bare historical facts of a great conflict in human history – as reason ascendant confronted the violence of superstition in its death-throes – and puts on the flesh of genuine characterisation and realistic people to explain the human experience in the circumstances. The fact the story can be read as “just as a story” simply adds further credit to the ability of the author and the commitment that they show in the years it took to write it. The work has clearly paid off; it teaches history effortlessly, it is enlightening and it has relevance for today. The next time one encounters advocates of a particular religious point of view to the exclusion of reason, the voices of thousands of real people killed for “witchcraft” can be heard. Read this book, and remember the victims.

