



The Devil in Velvet

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Professor Nicholas Fenton enters a pact with Satan and goes back in time to bawdy, turbulent Restoration London to prevent a murder that is about to take place. But he falls in love with the intended victim and resolves to alter the course of history. Breathless pace and ingenious plotting.--New York Times.

The Devil in Velvet Details

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From Reader Review *The Devil in Velvet* for online ebook

Robin Winter says

For my vote, this is John Dickson Carr's finest hour. A breathless romp of a book full of a darkness that shrouds motive, thanks to a beautifully constrained element of the supernatural. Talk about not giving the reader what she or he wants-- Carr is the master of this trick, and he manages it without cheating-- he told you up front what he was about to do and then like the best of magicians, he diverts you and does exactly what he said he would. With history peeking through the doors and windows, this is a remarkable study in a particular time and place, an evocative murder mystery and thriller wrapped up in a cloak while the devil smiles.

Lynne King says

I wrote this review in December and never put a rating on it and so it has just been sitting in the "ether" in Goodreads. It has now seen the light of day!

My husband John recommended this book to me and because I loved it so much, as a result I think I now have all the John Dickson Carr (AKA Carter Dickson) books; over eighty in total. These are wonderful mysteries and quite a few from the Golden Age in the 30s/40s.

I've often wondered why this incredible book by John Dickson Carr has never been made into a film. It combines everything: a social document of life in the seventeenth century, great descriptions about the sewage systems, swashbuckling adventures, time travel and a pact with the devil. What else could you possibly want? It's well-written and I couldn't put it down from the moment I started it.

The year is 1925 when fifty-eight year old Nicholas Fenton, a History professor at Paracelsus College, Cambridge, casually announces to a much younger friend, Mary Grenville, that he has sold his soul to the devil. He has read a manuscript about the death by poison of Lydia, Sir Nicholas Fenton's wife, in 1675 and wishes to return to that time, and take over the body of this unrelated person. By doing so he hopes that he can undo history, thus stopping the actual murder. Does he succeed though? Only you the reader can find out.

Ron says

A deal with the devil, time travel, body-switching, mystery and witchery and a late 17th century setting. I expected horror but it's more mystery and a little romance. This book really struck a note with me and is one of the few that I've taken the time to reread. It was part of a series of JD Carr reprints of historical mysteries (others were BRIDE OF NEWGATE and FIRE, BURN) but this was head and shoulders above the rest. I tracked down a hardcover copy a few years ago and added it to my permanent collection. I tried some of his more conventional mysteries (Gideon Fell, etc.) but didn't care for them.

DeAnna Knippling says

No objectivity here: I did not like this book and found it a drag. I feel the author, instead of writing the clever alternate history mystery that he intended (and which you can see in the events of the book), wrote a confusing, inharmonious mess. I kept finding myself muttering at the book, "What does that even have to do with anything?" and, "You TOLD us who the murderer is, now staaahp with the b.s." The novel has three different whodunnit reveals, blows the real one early on, then muddies the water just so the author can pack in a few more historical events that he assumes the reader is familiar with, not bothering to ground us at all. It feels like the author forgot how to write a good mystery--forgot about the reader--in order to please himself while writing in a genre (sci fi/fantasy) that he didn't know well. Frustrating. The end of the book, I was like, "I don't even know what the stakes are anymore, let alone how to tell when the plot will be over."

Vicki says

The Devil in Velvet is a historical novel/mystery with a touch of the paranormal thrown in to keep it interesting. Oh, and did I mention time travel?

Author John Dickson Carr first published it in 1951 and it was published again in 2014 as an eBook by Open Road Integrated Media. Carr made a career of writing crime and detective novels and won prestigious awards in both Great Britain and the USA. I came upon this novel courtesy of Early Bird Books, which is a great way to see the good stuff that's new again or to reintroduce favorites from yesteryear.

The convoluted plot begins with our protagonist, a professor and student of history who is a 58 year old bachelor in the year 1925. He confesses to a young lady friend that he has made a deal with the devil and is pretty sure he got the best of him. His desire is to be taken back to a specific date in the 17th century in order that he may prevent a murder. Professor Fenton is very specific with the devil that he must be sent back to inhabit the body of Sir Nicholas Fenton, ironically not a relative of our modern professor, who is a young man and an expert swordsman. He is also the husband of the woman who is poisoned, though history does not reveal who did it.

Amazingly, the devil agrees to his conditions, taking the trouble to explain to him that if Professor Fenton gets angry, this will give the mind of Sir Nick the opening to take over the shared mind, and the professor will not regain control until Sir Nick's rage is spent. The Prof considers that yes, lots can happen during a 10 minute rage, but he knows himself and he just doesn't get angry...and before long he wakes up in 1675 in the body of young Sir Nick, a brash and bold individual given to drink and bawdy behavior.

Fenton is shocked to find out that "bawdy" also includes providing a bedroom to his mistress, not just in his home, but across the hall from his wife's bedroom. Fenton may find out he can get angry too...

This is an interesting and enjoyable read, with a lot of historically accurate information on the manners, customs, dress, even swordplay, of the era of Charles II. The mystery of whether Professor Fenton can prevent the murder or failing that, discover who killed Lydia, and finally, does the Prof win or lose his wager with the devil...I'm guessing your interest won't flag til the last page is turned.

D-day says

The Devil in Velvet by John Dickson Carr, is combination fantasy, crime and historical novel. The premise is that Nicholas Fenton sells his soul to the Devil (the fantasy) in order to travel back in time to Restoration England (the history) to solve and prevent a murder before it happens (the crime). I have to confess, I found the first part of the novel tough going. In fact I put it down for a few months before trying again. It does pick up and the story provides a wealth of interesting detail on life in 17th century England, although you will learn more than you ever cared to know about 17th century swordfighting techniques. Not an easy book, but rewarding for those with a historical bent.

Shira Glassman says

Here we have a middle-aged nerd from 1920's Cambridge traveling back in time via Satanic pact to the Restoration period, of which he's been the world's biggest fanboy his entire life, in order to star in what I can only describe as seventeenth-century noir complete with femme fatales, impromptu duels, and sinister plots.

He spends a lot of the book internally squealing his head off about finally getting to see this gone-by-his-lifetime building, or that famous person, or being able to use period-appropriate speech accurately. However, he's in a Crime Story, so his fanboying is often cut short by drama and tragedy -- a juxtaposition I sometimes found difficult to buy. If I were living in some of the circumstances he had to endure, my anxiety would likely prevent me from appreciating all the nerdery around me.

Ultimately, I think the book would have been better had it not suffered from a curious case of trying to be two stories at once. The main storyline is about how he chose the date of his time-travel specifically to prevent the murder of, as a contemporary source reports, a woman by her cousin, with whom the victim's husband was having an affair. This storyline by itself would have made a perfectly serviceable piece of noir, Restoration-style, with periwigs replacing fedoras but the emotions no less familiar. This storyline was full of relationships and tension and twists, and its resolution, while grim, was at least satisfying because it made sense (I get really peeved by twists that either don't make sense or that I can't understand.)

However, the book kept going after that and tried to make sense of a second plot having to do with Restoration politics and the intricacies of Satanic pacts themselves, and at that point he basically lost me. Maybe omitting this bit would have taken away some of the fun of setting it in the Restoration, but I think it would have made a stronger book and still left the reader with plenty of period-piece fannishness.

As a Jew, I appreciate the fact that we seemed to be completely absent from the book--stuff this old, from random British writers, often speaks of us unflatteringly--and as a queer woman I loved the random neutral nod to sex between women (the femme fatale takes something the MC says the wrong way and informs him that no, she only sleeps with men.) However, warning for several uses of the term 'red Indian' (this is a pretty old book but that's still gross) and some violence some of which leads to death, both human and canine.

Melissa Symanczyk says

This book is a mystery, a pact with the devil, time travel and historical fiction all rolled into one. The historical fiction is, I think, the strongest element but it's all a bit vague and tries to do too many things. I

really wanted to like it and just couldn't get engaged.

John says

In 1926 Cambridge history don and Restoration buff Nicholas Felton does a deal with the Devil to be allowed to go back in time to 1675, to take over the body and temporarily the life of his ancestor, Sir Nick Felton, a staunch Royalist but also, as Felton (to distinguish from Sir Nick) soon discovers, an ogre. Luckily, it's the more urbane Felton who's normally in charge of the proceedings as he swaggers and swordplays his way through the London of Charles II's time; occasionally, however, in times of great emotional stress (usually rage) the monstrous Sir Nick takes over and Felton blacks out, to be told afterwards of what havoc Sir Nick might have wrought.

Felton's ostensible purpose in coming back to 1675 is to try to solve the mystery of who killed Sir Nick's wife Lydia -- and soon, as he becomes completely infatuated, physically and otherwise, with Lydia, his more important self-appointed task is to prevent the murder happening at all. And at first it seems he has succeeded: he identifies the servant who has been feeding Lydia a slow, subcritical diet of arsenic, and the trick whereby it's being done. Yet he exhibits mercy toward the culprit, knowing she was but someone else's catspaw. Because of his decency in this unmerciful age, he soon becomes an object of devotion for his servants. They approve, too, of his ejecting from the household one Meg York, Sir Nick's unconcealed mistress this past while, and who bears a quite astonishing resemblance to demure Mary Grenville, the daughter of a friend of Felton's back in 1925.

There's lots of swashbucklery, and by book's end all the machinations of the plot to kill Lydia (and other plots, equally murderous) have been exposed and satisfactorily explained.

John Dickson Carr is perhaps my favourite of the classic detective writers, and so obviously I read this book decades ago. All I could remember of it were the vague general setup and that it had taken me quite a time before the novel started gripping me. Exactly the same happened this time. Carr evidently did huge amounts of research for this, his second historical novel (his first, *The Bride of Newgate* was a straightforward historical; two more timeslip fantasies followed *The Devil in Velvet*, and I shall be reading them shortly). That research shows, oh gawd does it show. Aside from frequent pauses (at least during the earlier part of the book) to offer minute descriptions of architectural features or niceties of attire, the characters all speak in a vocabulary that I'm sure is filled with lots of authentic flourishes but is a bit bloody boring to wade through. Still, once the author gets over the fact that he needs to impress us with his historical erudition, things start zipping along merrily enough, in true Carr style.

One interesting aspect of the book: Occasionally Felton, using his deep historical knowledge of the period, attempts to warn his new contemporaries -- including Charles II during an audience at Buck House -- of events that lie in their near future; of course, no one believes him, as otherwise history would be altered. Yet such alterations seem permissible in a small way. When Felton warns Charles of the Popish Plot,* that warning actually contributes to making the true plotters' duplicity yet more effective. It's a nice touch: you can't change history except to make it *even more so*, as it were.

* The Popish Plot was a wheeze dreamt up by unscrupulous politicians/courtiers, primarily Protestants, to cause civil turmoil through making up out of whole cloth a conspiracy by Catholics to overthrow the monarchy. That way they could cruelly persecute Catholics, get rid of a bunch of adversaries whose loyalty to the Catholic Charles was a nuisance, etc. Hello to the FOX News of the 17th century.

Julie Barrett says

I tried, I really tried, to finish this book. I read 150 pages before I couldn't take it anymore.

On paper it seems right up my alley - time travel, a bit of a supernatural aspect, a murder mystery, set in my favorite period of British history (the Restoration) - what could be more perfect?! It turns out I also need a book that is written well with sharp pacing. The writing! It was like a B movie from the 1950's come to life! But not a fun B movie. Sigh. What a disappointment.

Delia Parker-Bailey says

I read this book when I was about 13yrs. On reading again, it's still a good read! An old History professor is obsessed surrounding the death of Sir Nicholas Fenton's wife at the time of the restoration (Charles II). He makes a pact with the Devil, to be able to go back in time to discover the truth, in return for his soul. There is a twist. This would make a brilliant film!

Marina says

I had no idea what I was getting into when my friend Lynne recommended this to me (see her review here).

My copy is a green penguin from the 1950s so I was expecting a crime novel. And so it is. There's a murder mystery but there's also time travel and a pact (or two) with the devil. Add a little romance, a generous dose of intrigue and plenty of swordplay and it all adds up to a lot of fun! I think John Dickson Carr was enjoying himself when he wrote this and that certainly comes through. This doesn't mean that he didn't take pains to stage his story set in 1670s London in a manner that lets the reader get a feel for the way in which people talked and carried on their everyday lives as well as the political and religious tensions that dominated the time period.

One my favourite moments in the book was when our time traveler hero tried to introduce his new 17th century servants to the concept of having frequent baths and was faced with near-revolt. It was only after blatant bribery that they *all agree with groans to one bath a month. But since 'tis you, they will shift their undergarments each week to the clean linen you vouchsafe to provide.*

Liz says

What a book. An very intricate mystery wrapped up in detailed historical fiction with romance and time travel to boot. Oh yeah. And a pact with Satan.

Nicholas Fenton, a Cambridge professor of history, makes a deal with Satan to travel back to the

Restoration--an era of British history that fascinates him. As part of the transaction, he will be transported into the body of wealthy swashbuckling younger man; a man whose wife is destined for a murder Fenton feels he could prevent. Pretty much a dream come true for an elderly don, and Fenton deems it worth offering his soul to Satan in exchange for the chance. Of course, Fenton also resolves to cheat the devil of his due.

I hadn't read a good mystery in a while, and this was a treat. The twists and turns kept me guessing until the final pages. The five central characters are richly drawn and I enjoyed spending time in their company.

Carr had just written a factual history of the period and he admits in the epilogue that the amount of trivia he included had "grown out of hand." I did find the quantity of historical minutiae distracting and a bit awkward at times--particularly in the beginning. However, once the plot got rolling, I became wrapped up in the drama. And the author also made excellent use his scholarship to incorporate historical figures into his narrative in fashion that was both believable and entertaining.

Jan Sørensen says

A wonderful colourful story of a deal wit devil and how to tease him. Set in historical London. Very well written as usual.

Diana Sandberg says

This is apparently a classic and I did rather enjoy it. Carr completely circumvented my usual objections to time-travel stories – there are no pseudo-scientific explanations, the hero travelled back to the Restoration via a deal with the devil. So there. Somehow, I find that less problematic. Anyhow, it was kind of fun; I liked the device of the main character struggling over possession of his 17th-century body with the original inhabitant. I found the love story angle unconvincing, however. Ah well. For those who like this sort of thing, Carr was apparently a fencer and there are two or three battles in the book that are quite detailed in description. I tended to skim them, rather in the way I do naval battles in Patrick O'Brian.
