



South of Darkness

John Marsden

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Thirteen-year-old Barnaby Fletch is a bag-and-bones orphan in London in the late 1700s.

Barnaby lives on his wits and ill-gotten gains, on streets seething with the press of the throng and shadowed by sinister figures. Life is a precarious business.

When he hears of a paradise on the other side of the world – a place called Botany Bay – he decides to commit a crime and get himself transported to a new life, a better life.

To succeed, he must survive the trials of Newgate Prison, the stinking hull of a prison ship and the unknown terrors of a journey across the world.

And Botany Bay is far from the paradise Barnaby has imagined. When his past and present suddenly collide, he is soon fleeing for his life – once again.

South of Darkness Details

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From Reader Review South of Darkness for online ebook

Sophia says

I have been meaning to read John Marsden for a while however I think I started with the wrong book. I just couldn't connect to this novel on an emotional level and found it slow.

My ancestors were sent out on convict ships and I have read their letters home. They were obsessed with rations after starving in England and the wonder of conditions in Australia but totally heartbroken by loss of family. My mother also volunteers to transcribe the surgeon journals from the Irish Women convict ships. Lately she has been telling me about these trips and the tragic circumstances of the women's convictions. For these reasons I found this novel lacking in the emotional punches I was expecting.

convictions.

Sarah says

6/11 - I'm a big fan of Marsden's *Tomorrow* series and I think this is his first full length novel since *Circle of Flight*, the final book of the spin-off series *The Ellie Chronicles*, so of course I picked it up at the library without even checking out the blurb. It didn't matter what it was about, it was John Marsden, what more was there to think about? Unfortunately, once I started reading I realised it wasn't quite as simple as that.

Supposedly this is Marsden's first foray into the world of 'adult' fiction. For me this isn't reading any more 'adult' than most of his *Tomorrow* or *Ellie Chronicles* books did. The main character is writing down his story at some point in the future, looking back at his early years and his struggles whilst growing up (despite being from a boy's point of view I feel like I'm still hearing from Ellie). The main character calls a place (strangely coincidentally) locally known as 'hell', home. The writing style reminds me of a project I did in high school, we were asked to write a series of diary entries from Juliet Capulet's point of view. That's what this books feels like to me. The writing is juvenile and unsophisticated and I think it sounds a bit like I wrote it.

I will finish the book because it's pretty easy reading and it is still John Marsden, but it's nowhere near the fantastic story I was expecting when I excitedly picked up the new John Marsden. To be continued...

7/11 - There is a **LOT** of talk about God here. Pretty much everything that happens to Barnaby is related back to god or a story from the Bible, especially the story of Job. I find too much God talk a bit wearying and it can put me off a story. While I'm sure God was a big factor in the average person's life in the 1700/1800s I'm not sure how likely it would be for a street person such as Barnaby Fletch to be thinking of God and how his life was being directed by him quite so frequently.

On page 217 Barnaby makes this slightly shocking statement

"Yes, the prisoners on the Hillsborough have stories of neglect and ill treatment that would make a man envy an African on a slave ship as having the better passage..."

Now, the reader doesn't know exactly what year this is supposed to be, sometime after the first fleet but I

can't be much more precise than that. Considering that and the fact that Barnaby is supposed to be writing this at some point after his arrival in Botany Bay, after the end of his sentence I would imagine, I'm guessing the date could be somewhere around 1830 or 40. If you take that date guesstimate as fact then it's understandable that Barnaby would not know the full extent of what an African slave's journey would be like, but John Marsden surely does. If Marsden explains Barnaby's faux pas away as saying it would be difficult for someone in Barnaby's position to know the truth of the African slave ships (no phones, no history channel, no internet, etc.), then why did he include it in the story. If Barnaby doesn't really know what he's talking about why does Marsden have him say it? If Marsden believes what Barnaby is saying is true then he needs to do a little more research, concentrating on Zong, a British slave ship infamous for the 1781 massacre of 132 sick and dying slaves who were thrown overboard in an attempt to guarantee that the ship's owners could collect on their cargo insurance. To be continued...

9/11 - This is not 'adult' fiction, no more than any of Marsden's previous books. The characters deal with adult situations - murder, robbery, sex, rape, jail time, transportation, flogging, hanging, and more - but so do pretty much all of his YA characters. This was okay, but I'm not sure if I will read any further books in the series, if there does turn out to be more which seems likely considering the open-ended way the book stopped. 2.5 stars because this was just average.

Mish says

It troubles me to say what I'm about to say about this novel because I loved everything I've read from John Marsden, and the context of the book is an important part of Australian history. There's no doubt that South of Darkness is informative, skillfully researched, and the voice and mannerism of his characters for this time period is authentic, but the story just didn't engage me. I felt like was reading a history textbook; it was rather boring at times.

Sorry John Marsden...

Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says

John Marsden is best known for 'The Tomorrow Series' though he has written and published at least a dozen more middle grade to young adult novels as well as a handful of non fiction works.

"Having been asked by the Rvd Mr Johnson to jot down a few notes about my upbringing and the manner of my arrival in the colony, I will attempt to do so, but I should say at the outset that I have little of interest to relate. I have not contributed much worth to the world, as will no doubt become obvious in the pages that follow..."

South of Darkness is Marsden's first novel for adults and features a young man by the name of Barnaby Fletch. It begins in late 18th century London where Fletch is struggling to survive on the streets of 'Hell'. Orphaned at the tender age of 5, or thereabouts, he sleeps under bridges, thieving food to survive, his only friend another street rat named Austin. Though he is a recipient of some kindness by a church priest and later a family who fishes him half drowned out of the Thames, Barnaby is a hapless sort of fellow who often finds himself in dire straits and on one occasion, aged about 12, he sees no way out of a terrible situation other

than to get himself transported to New South Wales to start a new life in the land that promises space and sunshine.

I have to be honest and admit that though I enjoyed Barnaby's adventures, my experience of the narrative was not unlike that of reading an extended account from a school textbook as part of a history lesson. South of Darkness is related in the first person past tense by the aforementioned Barnaby Fletch, with not much in the way of dialogue and a tendency to tell rather than show.

I have no doubt that the historical details of Barnaby's experiences are authentic, though his life is fictional. Marsden deftly evokes the grim streets of London, the bobbing transport ship, and the landscape of the fledgling Australian colony. I'm fairly familiar with the experiences of British convicts from an obsession with the era when I was in my mid teens but Barnaby's interactions with the Australian 'Indians' (indigenous) are not something I had read about before.

South of Darkness is a tale of survival, adventure, fortitude and hope. Though I feel it lacks some excitement it is still a fascinating account of the era and a young boys life. I assume there will be more to come from Marsden as the end of South of Darkness leaves room for a continuation of Barnaby Fletch's tale through adolescence and beyond.

RitaSkeeter says

I love reading Australian history, particularly the convict era. This book reminds me of one of my favourite jokes. A pom had just flown into Australia, and was he asked at immigration if he had a criminal record. The pom replied that he hadn't realised it was still a requirement.

I've read quite widely about convict history; both from history books and primary sources. If there is one thing Tasmania has done well, it is preserve its convict history. I have physical descriptions, heights, etc of ancestors from the 18th century thanks to that. How cool is that?!

Anyway, I digress. I love Australian history. I love John Marsden. Who doesn't love the Tomorrow series! I love history, I love Marsden. I have a match made in heaven. Right? Right? **Wrong.** :(

This book just didn't work out for me. There was too much that pulled me out of the historical setting which meant I never felt absorbed in the book. The language was out; it didn't feel consistent with anything I've read from the era. It didn't feel English at all to me actually. We had a protagonist who was unrealistically naive but whom held 21st century values and viewpoints. The narrator bombarded us with chunks of information I would have preferred to have been 'shown', given this was a novel, not a history book.

The author's list of sources at the end of the book do not fill me with confidence regarding the level of research into the culture and lifestyles of indigenous Australians at the time of invasion. And why oh why the author had the narrator constantly refer to them as 'Indians' I will never know. I have never come across that anywhere else. My frustration with this was nearly equalled, however, by the referring to the indigenous people as "my sable companions".

This was a heavily sanitised version of Australian history, and I don't recommend it.

On the plus side, I had been experiencing insomnia recently but this book cured me of that. *Zzzzzz*.

Ellie Boyd says

3 stars because I love this author.

The book was underwhelming, slow off the mark and generally uninspiring. It was hard to believe it was written by the same brilliant man who created the Tomorrow series.

A.B. Shepherd says

In May of 2011, long before I was writing book reviews, I discovered John Marsden. He is the award winning and brilliant Australian author of The Tomorrow Series and The Ellie Chronicles. The Tomorrow Series starts with Tomorrow, When the War Began, which was made into a movie a few years ago.

This series is set in modern day and revolves around six teenagers who are camping in the bush when Australia is attacked and overrun by an unidentified enemy. The teenagers return to town to find all of their families and everyone they know has been rounded up in a concentration camp. They must not only survive on their own, but they also do their best to fight the enemy as best they can.

It is a fantastic Young Adult series and I can't say enough great things about it.

South of Darkness is Marsden's first foray into writing a book for adults, or so I've read. It is the historical story of young Barnaby Fletch, an orphan growing up on the mean streets of London in the late 1700s, and later transported to Australia as a convict.

The story is told from a first person perspective. With Barnaby as the narrator we only read his name a handful of times throughout the book. It was very easy to forget it.

The book is written in a very Dickensian type prose, which I guess is to be expected due to the historical time period and the first person narration, but I really didn't enjoy that, and all I could think while reading it was this is sort of a poor man's Oliver Twist.

I was never able to emotionally connect with Barnaby. In spite of the numerous perils that threatened his life I never feared for him and I'm not sure why. Was it because I suspected he'd come out right because he was the narrator? Was it because I've just read too many books set in this horrible time period and am immune to the depravations he suffered? Was it because Barnaby was quite a religious young man and was frequently referencing the Bible? Was Marsden just trying to hard?

I do know that there are quite a few others who don't feel the same way I do, and actually loved this book.

Marsden put a ton of work into making this book historically accurate, and I think he succeeded quite well, at least in that regard. But Barnaby Fletch is no Ellie Linton and I really didn't care whether he lived or died.

Andrew Roberts says

3.5 stars. It felt like the book never quite went anywhere - there was a slow build up to nothing in particular. However I enjoyed the realistic depiction of life on the streets of London and the in colonial NSW. I hope that there is a sequel that explores more of colonial life and the journey of Barnaby Fletch.

Chloe says

Hello, John Marsden! We meet again! I don't think I've read a John Marsden since the *Tomorrow* series in my teens - which will always hold a special place in my book memories!

Told through the eyes of Barnaby Fletch, an orphaned homeless boy living in the desolate slums of London in the 1700's, every day is a struggle just to survive. Hunger is plentiful, friends are few. One night he hears about a wonderful place: Botany Bay - here the sun is warm, the food plentiful and the world a paradise. This becomes his goal. But, to get there, he must be caught committing a crime, survive the horrible conditions of the English prisons, and be sent on a Fleet ship halfway around the world - itself full of hidden problems and dangers.

Obviously well researched, *South of Darkness* is a fantastic read. The poverty and corruption of historical London and the early settlement of Australia is depicted so vividly under the masterful hand of John Marsden. I believe this is his first adult novel, one can only hope it's not his last!

Ben Langdon says

Not sure what to make of this book. While Marsden is famous for his dynamic teenage and young adult protagonists and his writing is generally cutting-edge contemporary - this book seemed a bit flat.

Really flat.

It told a story that seemed very familiar. Impoverished boy starts life in London, gets into crime, gets sent to Australia and it's all very familiar. I don't think it is what Marsden fans will expect or want, but then again if this is Marsden's first foray into 'adult' literature he might be trying to shed his previous style and might be deliberately trying to reinvent himself as a writer. To me, though, I think his strengths lie in the modern.

This seems a bit too much like a rushed Bryce Courtney read.

K. says

This was...I don't want to say "a massive disappointment", but I'm kinda sorta going to have to. I grew up on John Marsden books, and one of the things I've always adored about his books is the way that he creates characters that you care about almost instantly AND a plot that keeps you on the edge of your seat.

In contrast, this had neither. In fact, it felt a lot like he'd been helping a kid study colonial history for school and ended up with a whole lot of facts and figures about the Third Fleet and transportation in his head, and went "Hey, there's something there..." and tried to write a book about it. But instead of creating compelling characters and an interesting story, it ends up feeling like he went to 994.41 at his local library, borrowed everything on the shelf, and regurgitated what he read.

Barnaby is an incredibly dull character, and I honestly didn't care if he drowned in the Thames, got hanged for something he didn't do, fell overboard en route to New South Wales, got bitten by a snake or any other number of possible deaths. I just...didn't give a shit. He was far too holier-than-thou a lot of the time, and because of his age it almost felt like any time Marsden wanted to create tension, he added in an adult male who wanted to rape Barnaby. Which, WHAT. NO.

Once he arrived in New South Wales, what little plot there was descended into straight contrivance. Run away and get lost in the bush? Aboriginal tribe adopts you! Struggling to find a way to avoid being hanged when you get back from the bush? Rescue a missing small child! Characters that were significant in the early stages of the book pop up again just because, and the whole thing just fell flat for me.

Look, if you don't know a whole lot about colonial history, it's entirely likely that you'll have a completely different reading experience to me. But having curated exhibits on colonial Australia at a national level collecting institution and done two years worth of research and reading on the topic? This was just...ugh.

When I finished it last night, I gave it 2.5 stars. But in the light of day (well, not light. It's 6.08am and the sun's not up for another hour), that extra half star seemed mighty generous.

Adrian says

Whilst a fan of John Marsden's work in general this book is very slow moving. It seems well researched, but hard for any character but the main character to grow on you. The 'reminiscing' style of the writing did not work for me. Did i mention it was very slow paced? Maybe the next in the series will be a bit more lively.

S.K. Munt says

I was nervous starting this book because I haven't read a 'new' John Marsden novel in about 6 years, and though his other books are my favourite series-ever- I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to connect with a new one out of loyalty to the old, because the Tomorrow series set a bar for me that is yet to be hurdled by any other author.

But he came to my daughter's school last week as a part of the Whitsunday Voices festival, and I just had to purchase his latest one so that I could have it, and a battered old copy of one of his masterpieces signed and luckily, I ended up with two masterpieces!

South Of Darkness is a truly epic novel. It follows the life story of a London street urchin who takes a huge risk by getting himself purposefully charged with a petty crime, just so that he can be transported to Australia as a convict/settler and begin again in a land with more promise. That was an incredibly foolish idea and this fictional character may be one of the few people who wouldn't live to regret it, but John Marsden spins such

an engrossing tale that you just push the 'No one's that lucky!' thoughts out of your head and buckle up.

'Lucky' is probably the wrong word to use to describe the poor character Barnaby because his life is nothing but one disaster after another, so much so that at points you cringe and think that you can't bear to find out what happens to him this time. But I know from having read the Tomorrow When The War Began series again and again that the author is someone who has a knack for leading you to the very edge of despair before pulling you back with a wedgie before you take the final plunge and so I persevered and was rewarded. Thank goodness JM is such a hopeful writer or this could have been a bleak tale indeed!

I read this fast- the ticker up there says it took me a week but that's because I read 80% in a day and a half then freaked out when I realised that it was going to be over soon and stopped for 5 more days.

I picked it up again midmorning today and finished within an hour and I now have that lovely 'fat' feeling you get after having gorged yourself on a lovely story, and hope that he'll throw an encore our way (Please sir can I have some more?) while I try furiously dream up ways to one day, move someone with a novel the way he always moves me.

What can I say about the writing? Mr Marsden is just a consistently brilliant writer and if people can find flaws with his use of the English language then they'd better say so away from me because I think he's magnificent. Every sentence serves some purpose, every description is beautiful but simple and to the point without an adverb wasted, the dialogue is believable and the characters voices distinct without trying too hard. Once again he does that thing he does when he gets engrossed in the simpler aspects of life and flushes out insignificant moments to paint a clear picture or explain something, but to be honest I love the fact that he'll use 3 pages to describe how something's done because it not only makes me connect more with the character and the setting, but it's usually pretty educational too, which is one more tick in his column: this man does his research.

I love the fact that he's taken the time to show early Australian life his way because he has a knack for making what might be mundane to one pair of eyes beautiful and romantic to another. In fact, I think he does for Australian fiction what Baz Luhrman does for Australian movies- he makes us beautiful and unique and mysterious, even when the subject matter may appear to be anything but to anyone else.

Cannot recommend this highly enough. if it's a bit like The Potato Factory meets The Poisonwood Bible with the very best of Tomorrow When The War Began mixed in for grace and levity. Thanks for another thrilling adventure!

Annette Chidzey says

I found this first adult book by Marsden somewhat hard to assess. It had patches of intrigue and at times was quite compelling to the point where I found myself turning pages almost despite myself as I am not normally engaged by older convict and colonial language and descriptions. Though some outcomes were a little implausible as well, the novel clearly concludes poised to continue the story of Barnaby Fletch in early NSW. Despite being somewhat ambivalent overall, I will await the next account and certainly enjoyed the quality of Marsden's writing throughout. He is a master story teller.

Hal says

I really liked this book, in my head it reads a lot like *Life of Pi*. John's books always tend to the darker side of human nature but he has an unfailing joy and wonder of the world even in its dark moments.

Brenda says

Barnaby Fletch had not known anything in his young life beyond what the vagabonds and homeless all called "Hell". This den of iniquity was officially known on the maps as East Smithfield and the local church was St Martin's – the mid to late 1700s in London was a desolate place; a place where only the rich prospered. So young Barnaby, orphaned at a tender age and having to survive in the slums of "Hell" was always hungry, fairly well friendless and trying to survive with petty theft his only option.

One of Barnaby's better refuges was St Martin's – he would curl up inside the high pulpit, hiding quietly but always warm. He liked the Revd Mr Haddock who seemed a kind man; though Barnaby never showed himself to him. But Barnaby could usually find a little bit of food left by the Revd Mr Haddock; he would race to beat the mice to it.

The night Barnaby heard tell of a wonderful place called Botany Bay, where the sun was always warm, the food was plentiful and life a paradise, was the night Barnaby decided to get himself transported to New South Wales. In his naïve and youthful way, he had no idea that his idea was fraught with huge problems – and the first was Newgate Prison. The prison ship with at least three hundred convicts confined below decks was the second. What had he let himself in for? Would he even survive to reach Botany Bay, and what would he find there?

South of Darkness is the first adult novel by the renowned Aussie author John Marsden. And he has a winner in my opinion. An excellent historical fiction novel told in the voice of Barnaby Fletch as he narrated his life from a young age and moved on through the years until he reached adulthood. Well researched, this book certainly is an eye opener to the conditions many lived under in the early days of London, then in the early settlement years of Australia. I thoroughly enjoyed it and have no hesitation in recommending this novel highly.

Greta says

This book was really dull. The narrative was stilted, mainly because he put an endless number of "little did I know..." or "I was soon to learn..." Or similar plot spoiling cliches. Considering the journey the protagonist went through, it was a very boring read. Still felt like a kids book, wish I hadn't bought it

Phrynne says

This was a pleasant enough read but it was basically a little dull. It includes a lot of historical fact which is pretty interesting but the story is rather ordinary and has been done before many times and better. It was very

like a pale version of a Bryce Courtenay book only shorter. I quite enjoyed it but would not go round telling everyone to read it:)

Jacm says

As a big of John Marsden, I was a little nervous about this book. I was not sure if I would like the departure from usual explorations of modern teen life & relationships. I soon realised that I had nothing to worry about. South of Darkness is another example of frank, honest and insightful storytelling from the perspective of a young person. 4 ★

Annaleise says

John Marsden's first foray into writing for an adult audience is solid, but nothing special. Something is missing from his writing which ordinarily translates so beautifully for younger audiences. I didn't really feel anything for the main character in this novel, and towards the end I began to lose interest in his fate altogether. I found the premise of the novel (young orphan boy deliberately gets himself arrested to pursue a better life in the colonies of Australia) very interesting, but the actual execution to be a bit lacklustre. That's not to say I didn't enjoy it, but it did not meet my (high) expectations from a much loved author.
