



**The Merry Devils**  
Edward Marston

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## **The Merry Devils** Edward Marston

Bookholder Nicholas Bracewell, fresh from his triumph holding together his volatile players' company during a treasonous plot against Queen Elizabeth, is set to make the galleries of The Queen's Head ring with laughter with a new comedy, The Merry Devils. The lugubrious landlord is sure mischief will result. Nicholas sees only a harmless comedy that will not summon up real devils, but two actors adept at tumbling. How then, during the crucial scene, do three devils appear on stage, one looking disturbingly real? And what of the deviltry that follow? One imp, in fact, soon lies dead beneath the stage...The author's knowledge of Elizabethan statecraft and his deep affection for the period show in every word.

## **The Merry Devils Details**

Date : Published February 7th 2001 by Poisoned Pen Press (first published 1989)

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Author : Edward Marston

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# From Reader Review The Merry Devils for online ebook

## Robert Hepple says

First published in 1989, 'The Merry Devils' is the 2nd in the series of mysteries set against the background of a theatre company in Elizabethan London. The book title is that of a contentious play being staged by the company, and drives the various plots and sub-plots. The plot and connected sub-plots are daft as a brush, but fun when combined with the eccentric characters that make up the regulars in this series.

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## Annette O'grady says

the ending was quite surprising but very enjoyable lots of twist and turns

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## JodiP says

This is the second in the series. I liked the overall mystery; it wasn't obvious who was causing such havoc in the company's productions. As before, Marston does a good job of evoking the time period and sharing details. However, I think Nicholas Bracewell could use some fleshing out. There are only hints, the biggest of which are that he is secretive, which isn't that helpful.

There was also a very puzzling plot twist, when Ralph Willoughby immolates himself at the end. It made no sense, and there wasn't that big a reaction from the audience. I'll read the next in the series, and perhaps check out other of his series.

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## Dmfmls says

Interesting and likable protagonist, good setting, weak writing.

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## LJ says

First Sentence: London was the capital city of noise, a vibrant, volatile place, surging with life and clamorous with purpose.

Lord Westfield's Men, an Elizabethan acting company, is presenting a new play, "The Merry Devils." Contrary to the stage direction of book-holder, Nicholas Bracewell, a third "devil" appears when the scene only calls for two. Upon the second presentation, Bracewell decides to have there be three devils, but only two appear. The third is found dead under the stage. Threats increase and Nicholas must find who is behind it before anyone else dies.

Marston is one of the best at crafting time and place. He takes us from the workings of the theater, to the

streets, to the properties of nobles to Bethlehem Hospital, otherwise known as Bedlam.

This was a time when Christianity and superstition were intertwined and strict Puritanism was on the rise. The cadence and syntax of the dialogue reflect the period while delightful metaphors and humor exemplify the characters.

The cast of characters is interesting and appealing. Marston has provided enough of Bracewell's background to bring him to life but has, intentionally to us and the other characters, left much in the shade. The members of the company reflect the egos, insecurities and conflicts one would expect without be stereotypes. All the characters have dimension and substance.

I did appreciate the character of Dr. John Mordrake, based on Dr. John Dee, mathematician, scientist, occultist and consultant to Queen Elizabeth I. He seems to be the subject of numerous books these days.

Although there was a very good, twisty plot and a dramatic ending, it did feel overly contrived. However, that did not diminish my enjoyment or my anticipation of Marston's next Elizabethan Theater book.

THE MERRY DEVILS (Hist Mys-Nicholas Bracewell-England-Elizabethan) - G+  
Marston, Edward – 2nd in series  
St. Martin's Press, ©1989, US Hardcover – ISBN: 0312038631

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### **Andrew says**

It took me a while to get into this one, so how come I have rated it \*\*\*\*\*? Once the characters had been established, the story kept my attention because of the swift changes in focus between several different scenes.

It seemed likely that these different strands within the story would eventually come together, but the way the author kept the identity of the real villain hidden was very good.

I ended up liking this even more than, The Queens Head, the first book in the Bracewell Mystery Series.

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### **Helen says**

This is my favorite Edward Marston book. It is a fast-paced mystery full of excellent Elizabethan theater detail. I had the privilege of meeting Marston in London a couple of years ago and listening to him speak about his books.

As a mystery, this has much to recommend. There is the possibility of the supernatural, always a good addition to anything from this period and among actors. Plus, any student of Shakespeare will delight in learning more about the period and the theater of his time. This takes the visuals presented in Shakespeare in Love and delivers all the backstage and onstage drama of a not-quite-so-famous theater company. Marston's

regulars are in fine form.

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### **Ivan Benedict says**

This is a short, quick read - just over 200 paperback pages. It's a mystery, but not a murder mystery. There's a cast of many characters - various ones doing various bad things to other characters. The plot is devious & complex; it comes together in the last few pages.

The setting is as interesting as the plot. The time is Elizabethan, the place is London. We learn a lot about playhouses, the presentation of plays, the "special effects" available, etc. We also learn some about the Puritan objection to playhouses, about the insane asylum of the day, & about the jail of the day. In some ways we have become a bit more civilized I guess. Anyway, Marston is good mystery writer.

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### **Soozee says**

An excellent series, well researched so it takes you into Elizabethan England and the heady world of theatre. Amusing, entertaining, and gripping, I enjoyed it immensely. The characters are fun, and Nick Bracewell is the ideal bookholder for the company. The book explores the difficulties facing theatre companies at this time, as well as the treatment of those with mental illness.

It isn't essential to read this series in order, each story stands well by itself. I shall certainly be looking for more!

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### **Caroline says**

I love Edward Marston's books, whether they're the Railway Detective, Nicholas Bracewell, or about the military officer, Captain Daniel Rawson.

The Merry Devils is one of many plays performed by Lord Westfield's Men at several venues in London and in the country houses of prominent citizens.

There are only supposed to be two devils, but a mysterious third one appears in the first performance and Nicholas Bracewell, the bookman of the Company, investigates (at great personal jeopardy) the mystery. He eventually discovers the truth and forces the evil doers to face the music.

Edward Marston's story telling is lively and moves at a good pace. There are usually some surprises along the way, which, for me, all add to the intrigues of the narrative.

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## **Sammi says**

An enjoyable historical mystery, full of interesting characters, vivid settings and unexpected plot twists. 4.5 / 5

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## **Ellyreynolds says**

Another great read

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## **Maria Thermann says**

Having just discovered author Edward Marston's delightful series of murder mysteries set in Elizabethan times, I can't wait to read another Nicholas Bracewell adventure. Witty, insightful and full of wonderful red herrings, this novel deals with the creation of a new play, The Merry Devils, to be performed by Lord Westfield's men, a group of actors and playwrights working the various theatres located on the edge of the City of London.

They perform at taverns and inns, and on the stages of newly created theatres like The Rose in Southwark, London. It's been a very long time indeed since I last read a book where I didn't guess the ending half-way through the novel, so full marks to Edward Marston for keeping me on my detective toes right until the very end.

Plot:

When the play is staged for the very first time, two little devils are supposed to appear through trap doors fitted into the stage. Meant to astonish and frighten the Queen's Head audience, they are nonetheless entirely harmless. However, when the smoke clears on stage and two cute stage hands in blood red costumes start capering about, an unexpected third devil appears out of the trap door and is so realistic that everyone believes Satan himself has come to see the performance - including the actors who have no idea who the mysterious stranger in his satanic outfit is. Notoriously superstitious, the majority of the actors believe this was the Devil himself, passing judgement on their acting.

The lead actor holds the performance together, but all other players are quaking in their boots and it takes all of Nicholas' art of persuasion to coax them into performing the play for a second time - their lord and patron Lord Westfield has commanded a repeat performance...demanding the third devil appear just as before!

But where did that satanic apparition come from? Nobody could have known what was planned, for scripts are guarded jealously by theatre companies and only the Westfield Men should have known that two devils would jump out of the trap doors. When Nicholas investigates below the stage, he discovers that the counter lead weight fitted to the trap door has been cut. Why would a supernatural being have to resort to such tactics, he asks?

Puritans agog in the audience decide it is time this disgusting blasphemy is put to an end. They rally forces to

have all theatres closed for good and all plays forbidden henceforth. Yet another peril the Westfield Men have to deal with, as if terrified landlords, coy maidens and fanatical Christians weren't enough.

However, before it comes to any cultural calamities that would threaten the existence of the players and The Rose, Edward Marston puts his players into even greater jeopardy, with more and more mishaps occurring on and off stage that eventually culminate in a corpse.

Nicholas Bracewell, the guardian of the script and stage manager of Lord Westfield's merry group of actors, begins to slowly piece together who is out to ruin their livelihoods and the reputation of Lord Westfield into the bargain.

Throw in a love-sick playwright, sneak in a mysterious stranger incarcerated in a cell at Bedlam's horrific lunatic asylum, conjure up an ambitious and ruthless aristocratic nephew with a new manor to furnish and a county to impress and add a good dose of humour and you have a first rate historical mystery at your hands. The catty exchanges between the lead actors are truly a joy and one suspects that Mr Marston has had first-hand experience of the species!

Highly recommended Elizabethan fun, with all the stinkiness and cut-throats the streets of 1589's London can muster.

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## **Rob Spence says**

The second volume of the Bracewell mysteries is very much the mixture as before. The familiar figures of the Earl of Westfield's players, presided over by the calm and commanding presence of Nick Bracewell, encounter a series of baffling events that threaten their livelihood. Our hero's wit, persistence and fortitude allow him to engineer the obligatory happy ending, though not without some blood-letting on the mean streets of Elizabethan London.

The merry devils of the title are characters in a play of the same name that seems to be jinxed, possibly, according to its co-author, because it uses actual spells from the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Nick suspects a more worldly source for the trouble, and is eventually proved right, though not before an unexplained death and his own imprisonment disturb his plans. The subplot features a mysterious prisoner in Bedlam, and some dark work at a country estate. As in the first volume, the climax features a performance that is sensationally and bloodily interrupted. The play, a comedy as the name implies, seems very like Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass*.

The novel uses essentially the same elements as the first in the series, and is none the worse for that. The sights, sounds, and especially the smells of Bankside and Southwark in the late sixteenth century are vividly evoked. Again, some of the explication is a little laboured, and one wishes Marston veered more towards showing than telling, but it is a minor quibble, and for readers unfamiliar with Elizabethan stagecraft, I suppose it is essential. And, since Marston has been a successful full-time writer of historical fiction for thirty years and more, who am I to criticise?

Marston won't ever win the Booker, but these novels are more entertaining than many that will. And that should be enough for most. Even then, there are some profound moments, none more so when Dr Mordrake (a John Dee-like figure) is in conversation with the anguished poet Ralph Willoughby: "The duty of a divine

is to justify the ways of God to man. Christianity gives answers. The duty of a poet is to ask questions. That can lead to danger. Religion is there to reassure. Art disturbs."

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## **Gerry says**

Nicholas Bracewell puts on a performance of 'The Merry Devils' by Lord Westfield's Players but while the audience are enjoying an amusing production, a third imp, rather than the two that were expected, appears on the stage. It is a horrifying moment but the leading actor covers it up for the audience so that they are unaware that anything has gone wrong.

However, there are unsettling after effects of the action and at a later production only one devil appears ... the other lying dead beneath the stage. And so it goes on, as Bracewell tries to discover who is behind the actions that threaten to ruin his productions and possibly disband his players.

It is felt that it is another performing company that is behind the actions and when he investigates he finds himself arrested and imprisoned. Dangers abound and there is even a visit to Bedlam, the London madhouse, before Bracewell, with help from friends and members of the cast, sorts things out.

The Elizabethan theatre atmosphere is captured very well but the storyline leaves me a little confused so although I am a fan of Edward Marston, this one does not quite do it for me.

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