



A Madras Miasma

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Madras in the 1920s. The British are slowly losing the grip on the subcontinent. The end of the colonial enterprise is in sight and the city on India's east coast is teeming with intrigue. A grisly murder takes place against the backdrop of political tension and Superintendent Le Fanu, a man of impeccable investigative methods, is called in to find out who killed a respectable young British girl and dumped her in a canal, her veins clogged with morphine. As Le Fanu, a man forced to keep his own personal relationship a secret for fear of scandal in the face of British moral standards, begins to investigate, he quickly slips into a quagmire of Raj politics, rebellion and nefarious criminal activities that threaten not just to bury his case but the fearless detective himself. The first Detective Le Fanu Adventure, *A Madras Miasma*, tells a classic tale of murder, corruption and intrigue with a sharp eye on British colonial politics and race relations. It is a story that, like its main protagonist, has its heart firmly in the right place.

A Madras Miasma Details

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Col says

Synopsis/blurb.....

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As Le Fanu, a man forced to keep his own personal relationship a secret for fear of scandal in the face British moral standards, begins to investigate, he quickly slips into a quagmire of Raj politics, rebellion and nefarious criminal activities that threaten not just to bury his case but the fearless detective himself.

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Praise for *A Madras Miasma*:

"As one would expect from a distinguished Australian academic who has written and lectured on the subject of Indian history, the background is effortlessly convincing. In Le Fanu, Stoddart has created a character with huge potential for development, both as a person and as a witness to momentous historical events. In purely technical terms, the plotting of the book is as impressive as the narrative style, and the description of the bloody end to the industrial protest is as gripping as anything I have read in a long while. The ending is very clever without being showy, and I will certainly be on the lookout for the next chapter in the career of Christian Jolyon Brenton Le Fanu, MC." - Crime Fiction Lover blog.

My take.....

Brian Stoddart's debut novel takes us to India after the First World War. India is fast approaching a period of upheaval and change as the fledgling nationalist movement starts agitating for reforms and a greater say in their own affairs. The Colonial masters are resisting. A dead European woman is discovered in a canal.

I have to be honest and say that I approached the book with a small bit of hesitation as I'm more used to reading books with a more contemporary setting. After maybe 10 pages, my doubts were dispelled as Stoddart's main character, Detective Le Fanu and his back up, Sergeant Habibullah quickly drew me into this tale of murder with the subsequent investigation and life in 1920's Madras.

Le Fanu, our lead is a veteran of the Great War and is the most interesting character I've spent time with this reading month. He possesses an inherent decency; a trait particularly apparent in his dealings with Habi, his underling – a Muslim policeman who he treats almost as an equal. The unevenness emanating solely from the difference in their ranks, rather than anything related to colour or religion. The contrast with most of the European elite, with their casual racism couldn't be starker. Life amongst the business community and ruling classes mainly revolves around cricket, golf or drinks at the club whilst furiously gossiping and complaining about everything, particularly Le Fanu and his pressured boss, Inspector-General Wilson.

I'm reluctant to elaborate too much on the story, I'd rather recommend you read it yourselves. It ticked every box for me. Setting, characters, mystery, pace, resolution – all spot on.

Stoddart's depiction of Madras and his portrayal of the disparity in circumstance between the local inhabitants and the elite was fascinating. It's a city where few secrets can be kept, and the gossip spreads faster than the traffic.

Le Fanu, Habi, Arthur Jepson, Wilson, Ro, Virginia Campbell - interesting characters all of them and strong support for Le Fanu. Some of the scenes where Jepson and Le Fanu interact and where Le Fanu encounters Campbell in the early stages of the investigation are humourous and inject some light relief without ever reducing the narrative to comedy. They were a lot of fun to read and I would imagine fun to write.

The investigation as it unfolded was enjoyable to follow and credible. The author balances the pace superbly, getting us to the final destination quickly enough, but with time to enjoy the scenery on the way; providing us with details of Le Fanu's past and present and a possible glimpse of his future, as well as offering a view of a fascinating time in India's history.

The good news is - there is a second Detective Le Fanu book on its way soon – The Pallampur Predicament.

5 from 5

Many thanks to author Brian and Emily at Crime Wave Press for sending me a copy of this for review. Crime Wave are a small publishing house located in Hong Kong. They mainly concentrate on mysteries with an Asian flavour, but I believe are extending their scope in the future. Their website is here.
<http://www.crimewavepress.com/>

Brian Stoddart is an Australian academic with about 15 non-fiction books to his name. There's a brief author biography on Crime Wave's site. Click here. <http://www.crimewavepress.com/index.p...>

<http://col2910.blogspot.co.uk/2014/10...>

Joan Bowman says

Mystery, drugs, murder...

I really liked this book and will read another with this policeman as the leader of the crime unit. The setting is in India before its independence and the descriptions were good enough to "see" the locations. I will recommend this book to anyone who likes well written period crime stories in an exotic location.

Karen says

Set in 1920's India, A MADRAS MIASMA takes place in an India that is looking towards independence from the British. With a strong sense of place, culture and time built in, this is debut crime fiction with potential.

The central character, Superintendent Le Fanu is a complex man in a judgemental and class-riven society. His wife has left him, he's in love with an Anglo-Indian woman, a relationship frowned upon by the ex-pat British "society" that remains influential. His investigative side-kick is a local man, who he admires for his ability, and skill as an investigator. Another point against him on the part of the establishment, of course a man like this is going to be plagued by a hierarchy populated by buffoons and twits - although his particular rod to bear is a particularly odious, and stupid man.

Whilst that hierarchical aspect of our put-upon detective, and the undermining boss is nothing new, it is helped along by the class and societal implications of the power-base that Le Fanu must work within. It's particularly interesting to look at the implications of that, and the relationship of the authorities and the local people, and the "gentry" and the local people, with an eye to the date, and that independence fight. On the one hand the British come across as masters of their own demise, although there are glimpses of the opposite view - people like Le Fanu that appreciate the country and the people.

All of this is built into a good plot, that again feels "of the time". The rather striking discovery of a young woman's body dumped in a canal, leads quickly to the discovery of morphine in her body, taking the investigation of her murder into some dark recesses. Again, interesting historical connections are drawn here - with the ex-pat community made up of business people, military, spies, diplomats and members of the "Fishing Fleet" - young women of a certain age on the hunt for a husband. There are connections at all levels between Britain and India, and the never-ending fight against drug smuggling rings and corruption.

There's a very strong sense of time, place and culture about *A MADRAS MIASMA* and the story flows well. It feels a little like it could have been written in the 1920's. Le Fanu is a nice balance of put-upon, stand-alone, maverick cop and thinker. A man who is not comfortable in this place, or this time, because of the strictures and petty politics of ex-pat society, who, it has to be said, earns points because of that.

A really enjoyable debut, *A MADRAS MIASMA* finishes with what feels like the lead in to book two. Hope that's true.

http://www.austcrimefiction.org/review/A_MADRAS_MIASMA_by_Michael_Stoddart.htm

Nae says

I really enjoyed this book, it did the one thing I treasure most in a book, it took my mind away from my everyday life and worries into an entirely different time and place. Mr. Stoddart does a marvellous job setting the scene of Madras in turmoil as the British have begun to lose the stranglehold on the governing a country that is just beginning to find its own identify and making attempts to reclaim India as their own. I could almost smell the spices, feel the intensity of the heat and smells of India as I read. Set in and around the crumbling lines of communication between "old India hands" and newer, more enlightened "young Indian hands" the racial prejudices that ultimately saw Ghandi effectively hand the British their walking papers (so to speak) a fairly cut and dried murder of an English woman gradually assumes more and more importance across those lines of racism, prejudice and the British reluctance to admit they may have handled this country and its people badly. I am looking forward to reading more in this series.

Bharadwaj Vasudevan says

this novel will remain my new favorite for quite sometime. a brilliant plot with a close knit of characters, each threading a significant part to play. this novel peaked my interest because this plot is setup in my city, just rewind to the past and I was able to walk that old Madras through eyes of Le Fanu. the author has cleverly created all the insecurities and inequalities that existed during the British hold and chosen a right balance to say both sides had their villains. My only feedback to the author is it's a well researched work, the only part where he calls madurai city as madura, was it is genuine mistake?

Kathy says

two and a half stars for me

found this looking around at reviews by goodreads people as I was on a search for a new series I might like - but this one struck out for me as it just does not translate well into 2018 highlighted some selections as I went along that I will turn to public for others who might want a taste of this Indian murder mystery, Madras region, post World War I

Bob Davies says

An intriguing murder mystery set against the stunning backdrop of 1920s India. This book is peopled with plenty of fascinating characters who I'm sure you'll love and hate in equal measure. Brian Stoddart portrays very convincingly how life must have been in India immediately after the First World War. Le Fanu is an interesting man who seems very real and likeable (how can you fail to love a cop who rides a motorcycle around Madras for relaxation?!). I was sorry to finish this book because I was enjoying it so much and look forward to reading the next in what I hope will be a long series!

Kerrie says

Here is a new-to-me author whom I have already decided to follow.

This story, set in Madras in the early 1920s, oozes with authenticity. The British Raj is struggling to maintain control of its Indian empire, corruption amongst its administrators is rife, and the voice of the Indian population is getting stronger.

The young woman found dead in a local canal is identified as part of the British "fishing fleet" and flags are raised when she is discovered to have a large level of morphine in her system. She came to Madras with another young woman who seems surprisingly unaffected by her friend's death. They have been part of the ex-pat social scene for a few weeks, and so there are a number of suspects.

This is a police procedural too, highlighting the tension between the newly created police force, and the colonial administration. Le Fanu's status in the colonial community has been affected by the fact that his wife

has left him to return to Britain, and he has an Anglo-Indian housekeeper. He is not popular with the colonial administration.

A good plot with some interesting strands. Good reading.

Carolien says

This book contains so many elements to enjoy. It has a substantive plot, interesting characters and the setting is unusual. The author manages to convey the complexity of both the British and Indian sides during the final stages of the Raj. Well-written and I will definitely continue the series.

Pgchuis says

[persistent erections in the presence of the apparently irresistible Virginia Campbell. (hide spoiler)]

Julie says

In the 1920's most of the British in India are aware that their time in the country is coming to a close. However, Le Fanu is a police officer in Madras, a very conservative city, where the majority of British are not accepting the coming changes easily. So when a British woman is found dead in the river with morphine in her system the political pressure upon Le Fanu is enormous. With the help of his sergeant and the faltering protection of his mentor, the officer seeks a murderer among the elites of local society.

Stoddart did a brilliant job of describing Madras in the 1920's. He drew a very vivid picture of the place and people. It was a fascinating read.

He also did a good job showing the complexity of political and colonial perspectives of the time. It was sickening, but emphasized the pressures under which the police force found themselves at the time. Really the vast majority of British characters in this book were entirely loathsome. No redeeming qualities. Habi was a great character, and I wish we had seen more of Ro.

Although I enjoyed this book, if the next in the series saw Le Fanu staying in Madras under the new circumstances that came about at the end of this book, I probably would not read it. I read mysteries for the puzzles and find books where I despise all of the suspects to be very stressful. Books where I hate both the suspects and the police are really not enjoyable for me.

M.R. Graham says

It was a very entertaining read! I loved Le Fanu and Habi, thoroughly despised the villains, and was drawn along by the plot. The setting especially fascinated me, and Stoddart's intimate familiarity with it showed beautifully. I think I would call it more of a police procedural than a mystery, though; we follow along with Le Fanu and receive all the details of his investigation, but there are few clues for the reader to put together.

This is not a complaint. I like procedurals as much as I like mysteries. However, I think I prefer Stoddart's nonfiction. His style is more conducive to informing than to emoting, and he has a tendency to "tell" rather than "show," especially in regard to characters' feelings. The book also could have stood a much closer edit, with missing punctuation, unnecessary extra spaces, paragraphs split in the middle, incorrect punctuation, and a large number of ambiguous antecedents.

Deepti says

An absolutely fabulous read!

Firstly, this book is not a crime thriller. It is a police investigation novel. The two genres must be differentiated in that, while the former is taut, filled with suspense and who-dunnit, the latter is more akin to reality. The police do find out who the culprits of the crime are and in most cases, some evidence and some interrogation yield the confession from the criminal. It is important to understand this, because, you would find this book tepid if you were to read it expecting a thriller.

Secondly, Brian Stoddart has done a great job in capturing Madras in the 1920s. I am not a historian to judge the chronological accuracy of the novel. However, as an Indian, who has lived 25 years of her life in Madras, more precisely, in Adyar, I can vouch for how beautifully and realistically the author has captured the topography, the attitude of a native Madrasi, the anti-British agitation sentiments, the..everything! He knows being an Indian in Madras better than I do!

A well paced, political, fascinating read ! Looking forward to the next Inspector Le Fanu!

Sue says

A Rollicking Read

Fast paced with interesting characters and many more twists and turns than a bowl of spaghetti. Thoroughly well researched. A light enjoyable read.

Elka Ray says

An intriguing and well-written mystery set in an interesting time and place - 1920s India. Believable and vividly drawn characters.
