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## Rapscallion Details

Date : Published June 16th 2008 by Harper Collins (first published January 1st 2008)

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Author : James McGee

Format : Hardcover 412 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Mystery, Fiction, Crime, Historical Mystery, Adventure



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# From Reader Review *Rapscallion* for online ebook

? Irena ? says

\*\*\*4.5\*\*\*

From the historical notes in the book:

**"Over the course of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain incarcerated thousands of prisoners of war in both mainland gaols and hulks; former men-of-war of British and foreign origin that were considered too old and too unseaworthy for active service. By 1814, the population of the prison ships had reached its peak of 72,000 souls."**

In *Rapscallion* you get a very well researched and vivid picture of the hulks, the life on the prison ships. It is more than difficult to read the first third of the book, the time Hawkwood spent as a prisoner.

Too many prisoners of war have recently managed to escape from one of those ships. The Navy sent two officers to investigate. One of them drowned and the other is missing. The Navy has turned to Bow Street for help. Matthew Hawkwood's assignment would be to go undercover as an American prisoner of war, to find out the means of their escape and what exactly happened to the two officers. I love how the world in this series is not all black and white. He finds help and friendship in the most unlikely places, some of the characters even find love.

As I said, the part of the book that describes the life of prisoners of war on those ships is really hard to read. There is a hierarchy in place and all kinds of depravities. He befriends a French sea captain Lasseur, who is almost as great as Matthew Hawkwood. The challenge was not just the danger Hawkwood would be in, but he would also be out of his element.

**"Hawkwood's world was one of ill-lit streets, thieves' kitchens, flash houses, fences, rogues and rookeries. Lasseur's, in total contrast, was the open deck of a sailing ship, running before the wind. It seemed to Hawkwood that, whereas his world was an enclosed one, almost as dark and degrading as the hulk's gun deck, Lasseur's was one of freedom, of the open main and endless skies."**

It's hardly surprising Lassaur wanted to escape.

They eventually manage to escape, but Hawkwood was only a bit closer to the truth. The description of the book already states that smugglers would be one of his problems.

Even though Matthew Hawkwood is really out of his element for almost half of the book, his challenges are never too much, never something he can't face. He has someone to watch his back, however strange that may be. Even Nathaniel Jago makes an appearance after Hawkwood's disappearance makes it clear that Bow Street boss is someone who greatly appreciates his Runners, Hawkwood especially.

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David says

The third book in James McGee's *Hawkwood* series of novels, this see Matthew Hawkwood sent undercover to the prison Hulks to investigate both the escape of several prisoners, and the disappearance of those sent previously to track them down.

Again taking factual history as its starting point (life on the prison Hulks, and the activities of the Free

Traders (i.e. Smugglers)), the plot builds up to include those afore-mentioned smuggling rings, and a little bit of sea battle (a first in the series). It's also a first that the majority of this novel takes place away from London!

I do have to say, however, that even more so than the first two books, I found this one to be very reminiscent of one of the Sharpe books from the 90s - have a look at *Sharpe's Company* (in particular) to see what I mean! That's not to say I didn't enjoy it - I did - but just that, to me, elements of the plot seemed very familiar

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### **William says**

I was undecided on whether to give this book two or three stars. I had to force myself through the first third of the book and I would give that section [barely] one star. I understand that POW's in that war were kept in conditions similar to what was portrayed, but it was still disturbing to read and not the kind of book I would choose. Once I was able to get through that part of the book, I enjoyed the remainder and would give the final two thirds of the book four stars. I enjoy this series of books, but I doubt if I would ever read this one again.

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### **Lois Scott says**

Another wonderfully engaging trip through the world of British smugglers and French prisoners of war! Oh and the wonderful ability of Jago to rescue Hawkwood!

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### **LJ says**

RAPSCALLION (Hist/Pol. Proc-Matthew Hawkwood-Georgian) – VG+  
McGee, James – 3rd in series  
Harper Collins, 2008, UK Hardcover – ISBN: 9780007212729

First Sentence: Sark stopped, sank to his knees and listened, but the only sounds he could hear were the pounding of his own heartbeat and the rasping wheeze at the back of his throat as he fought desperately to draw air into his burning lungs.

The Navy sent two officers out to investigate reports of a smuggling operation and the increase in the number of enemy prisoners who have escaped detention from their prison ships. The first investigator was found having drowned and the second hasn't been heard from.

The Home Secretary now requests the Bow Street, and Bow Street has assigned Matthew Hawkwood to go undercover aboard one of the ships. Conditions aboard ship are more vile than could be imagined and Hawkwood is soon fighting for his very life.

With each new McGee book, I am fascinated to see on what historical subject he will base his plot. The first book, "Ratcatcher," had to do with political plots and the security of the Royal Family. The second "Resurrectionist," was much darker and dealt with grave robbers. This third book focuses on the treatment of foreign prisoners of war and smuggling.

His period descriptions and historical detail make his books evocative and educational. This is high action and suspense at its best. Think Saturday matinee pirate movies. It is definitely plot, rather than character drive, but that doesn't make the characters any less interesting. It does mean you don't know whom to trust.

McGee's writing is incredibly visual, which is both good and a bit hard to deal with at time, and it is always incredibly exciting. There is a bit of "ride to the rescue" at one point, but McGee even makes that work.

This is the consummate edge-of-the-seat, great weekend read and, I think, McGee's best book so far.

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## Jenre says

James McGee is another author I discovered by picking up a book in a charity shop. In that case it was the first book in his 'Hawkwood' series "Ratcatcher". Since then I've read all the Hawkwood books and have found them to be hugely entertaining. *Rapscallion*, the third in the series, is no exception.

Each of the Hawkwood books have been slightly different in tone. *Ratcatcher* was a police mystery where our hero had to prevent a bomb being set off in London - strangely topical, *Resurrectionist* was a quasi-horror story of gravediggers and a Frankenstein-like mad man. *Rapscallion* is an action adventure. All of the books are set in the Regency period around the time of the Peninsular Wars before Bonaparte was captured and exiled.

The book begins with, our hero, Bow Street Runner Matthew Hawkwood, being sent undercover to the prison hulks where hundreds of French prisoners-of-war are held. His mission is to discover how several prisoners have escaped and what has become of two naval officers also sent to investigate the prison escapes. To do this, he is placed on "The Rapacious" a filthy, stinking prison hulk, so deep undercover that only two men know he is there as a police officer - a fact to which Hawkwood responds:

*"In that case, I hope you all remain in good health. I'd hate to find that I'm stranded on the bloody ship because you've all been struck dead in your beds."*

To aid his undercover persona of an American prisoner of war, he attaches himself to another prisoner, French privateer, Lasseur (who is unaware that Hawkwood is undercover). The couple remain together throughout the rest of the novel and it is the way that this 'odd couple' interact with each other which provided most of the pleasure for me in reading this book. They are very different in their personalities. Hawkwood is unsentimental, dour, realistic and often resigned; Lasseur is romantic, sentimental, optimistic and often has a devil-may-care attitude. It doesn't take them long to form a friendship despite their differences and also despite being on opposite sides of the war. It is this last point that makes the relationship most interesting as, even though they are friends, you know that either one would kill the other for the sake of their own country and come very close to doing so on a number of occasions.

McGee's other Hawkwood novels are set almost entirely in London. This book is set in a number of places from the prison hulks, to the Kent countryside, to the enemy's lair, to the English Channel. It is this constant moving around which provides much of the impetus in the novel and makes it a fast paced read. Each setting is lovingly described in historically accurate detail. This is no wallpaper history, diluted down for our twenty-first century sensibilities. We are treated to detailed descriptions of the sights, sounds and smells of hundreds of men trapped on a prison hulk - including the state of the toilet facilities! To be honest, I wouldn't

have it any other way. The description draws you into the book, making you experience, through Hawkwood's eyes, the desperate circumstances of these ships. I was immersed.

This was a most enjoyable read: A fast paced storyline; believable and interesting characters; and good, accurate period detail. I wouldn't hesitate to give this a grade of 'Excellent'.

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## **Mick says**

*Rapscallion* sees the return of Matthew Hawkwood, former British army rifleman and current Bow Street runner, in an adventure which sees him impersonate an American prisoner of war, infiltrate a gang of smugglers, and escape a prison hulk.

I've written in reviews of the previous novels in this series, *Ratcatcher* and *Resurrectionist*, that the weakest element of this historical mystery series is its protagonist, Matthew Hawkwood. *Rapscallion* is a welcome change. Whether because McGee is more familiar with the character or because Hawkwood spends most of this novel far outside his comfort zone, forced to go undercover as a yankee soldier in a series of tough scenarios in which he's completely out of his depth, but I found Hawkwood a lot more enjoyable as a protagonist this time around. Constantly forced to improvise, in unfamiliar and dangerous settings, Hawkwood shines as a character in a way that's reminiscent of that other famous literary Greencoat to whom he has been compared, Bernard Cornwell's rifleman Richard Sharpe.

As always, McGee expertly grounds his story in the details and atmosphere of the period. His depiction of regency England is a living, breathing, world with all the grime and stink that entails. This is the greatest strength of the series, and *Rapscallion* builds upon this feature with a horrifying look into Britain's prison hulks, a perilous journey through the English countryside, and dark goings-on on the Channel Coast. Together with a rejuvenated main character, some brilliantly vicious villains and a terrific supporting cast, this is the best Hawkwood yet.

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## **Jen says**

*Rapscallion* is the third in this series featuring Matthew Hawkwood, but I have not read the previous two. Hawkwood, a Bow Street Runner, has received an undercover assignment to the British Navy. Two Navy lieutenants have gone missing while investigating a smuggling ring aiding the escape of French prisoners of war.

Hawkwood is given the identity of a captured American who has joined Napoleon's army. As he speaks French, he will be able to discover more information about the escapes and the missing Navy men. His assignment puts him close to Paul Lasseur, a French privateer and fellow prisoner. The two men attempt to negotiate the horrors of the prison hulk (an older ship, no longer seaworthy, that functions as a prison).

Hawkwood's respect and liking for Lasseur grows as they both suffer the indignities and hardships of prisoners of a war, and Lasseur is a likable and competent individual with definite sympathies for the underdog.

What is most fascinating are the descriptions of conditions aboard the hulk. Even as I read, I was thinking,

"Can this be true? Were the conditions this awful?" I knew I'd be researching this when I finished the book, but the author included a section at the end that gave the resources for his descriptions saving me some trouble.

McGee's historic research was also fascinating in the area of smuggling, especially in connection with the town of Deal, a legendary smugglers' haunt, and the information about guinea boats.

The novel gives a wealth of historic atmosphere and some thrilling action. The characters are well-drawn and the plot kept me involved. I don't know what I expected from this novel, but it delivered much more for someone who loves historic detail. Hawkwood is an interesting character, but Paul Lasseur (Hawkwood's erstwhile enemy and present friend) is worthy of a novel of his own.

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## **Lissa Notreallywolf says**

I should add adventure as a category to my books if I persist in reading books like James McGee's, because he is a master of adventure.

Hawkwood is dark haired, long haired for the most part, an exmilitary marksman, and now a Bow Street Runner. Te books are beautifully written, often laced with technical vocabulary from the period, demonstrating the authe attention to detail and research. I particularly enjoyed his explorarion of the prison hulks, also current in Turn, the series about revolutionary spies. Like the conditions of Bedlam, these institutions are nowhere one wants to be found. Yet reading about them Jame McGee somehow manages to keep you enthralled with the true horrors of the floating prisons. Hawkwoods running mate in this book is a charming Frenchman, and a pirate at that. While investigating escapes of prisoners and two prior informants, Hwakwood stumbles onto a plot of international significance. And like most really interesting historical novels you learn something about the time and the big picture that is surprising to you.

You can count on appreciating your shower reading this book because the prison ship is filthy, smelly and a death trap even without the evil instincts of your fellow prisoners.

I could also add a category Pirates and Smuggling, because I have been uncharacteristically reading such books for the past two years, mostly in the form of historical action fiction. My last adventure series was about the descendents of American privateers, The Jefferson Key by Steve Berry. [If you have a choice between the two, I would recommend McGee's writing over Berry's any day. But part of that is my distaste for Berry's politics and his Dan Brownish plots.] These are the British roots of the colonial smugglers. Here again, government sanctioned or "unofficially permitted" smuggling, and profiteering from the war machine. What is surprising is the use of English golden guineas to pay Bonapart's army. The volume of the unofficial export is staggering, and it's hard to understand how British banking held up under these circumstances. Read the book if this tiny economic factoid intrigues you.

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## **Denise says**

The third book in this outstanding historical mystery series takes Bow Street Runner Matthew Hawkwood out of his accustomed London surroundings and straight into circumstances that can only be described as hellish. Deep undercover on the British prison hulk "Rapacious", he poses as an American POW in order to find the truth behind numerous prisoner escapes and the respective murder and disappearance of the two navy officers previously sent to investigate. To improve his chances of blending in, Hawkwood attaches himself to a fellow prisoner, a French privateer named Lasseur who becomes an unexpected friend in the harsh environment they find themselves in. A grim, action-packed and suspenseful adventure, this was doubtless the best book in the series so far. Looking forward to the next!

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## **C. A. Powell says**

This is the third Matthew Hawkwood story that I have read. This one was very exciting too. Our Bow Street Runner is sent, undercover, as an American prisoner of war. He is among French prisoners on a prison hulk that is at anchor in the River Thames close to the Medway and the Isle of Sheppey. Very soon, Hawkwood and an escaped French sailor are caught up in a smuggling ring of dynamic and well organised criminal abilities. The reader is taken on a lavish and nail-biting adventure. Great story and I look forward to the next Matthew Hawkwood story. I would also like to add that these stories would make for a fabulous TV period drama show.

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## **Dave says**

Excellent book , good paced storytelling .

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## **Sylvester says**

Love the name, the cover, those two things alone drew me, but I was not disappointed by the contents either. From life aboard a prison hulk, to the smuggling world, and behind the scenes of the Napoleonic War, there was plenty of action, and the writing was not over-labored or anachronistic (I really hate when modern attitudes are brought into historical novels). I also loved that the author gave the historical facts in his notes at the end of the novel (-as crazy and dark as the hulks sound in the novel, they were probably much worse in reality). And several of the characters were based on real people. Knowing this added to my enjoyment. I'm going to have to check out the rest of McGee's writing.

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## **Carrie Mcfall says**

Great period piece, thriller, mystery, chase. Satisfying ending.

The language of sailors and soldiers is never a pretty thing. If language is an issue, and you want to own a physical copy, carry whiteout so you can reread it more than once.



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**Geevee says**

[ relating to free trading, smuggling, guinea boats (gold bullion) and Napoleon's opening of the harbour of Gravelines during the wars (hide spoiler)]

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