



Séance Infernale

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An extraordinary debut novel--dark, fast-paced, thrilling--set in contemporary and nineteenth-century Europe, the United States, and Scotland, involving the true inventor of moving pictures; his lost film made in Edinburgh in 1888; and a shocking series of crimes terrorizing the city in present time.

The time: 2002. The city: Los Angeles.

Alex Whitman, movie memorabilia dealer who can find anything, is hired by an eccentric film collector to locate what could be the first film ever made, *Séance Infernale*. Its creator, Augustin Sekuler, is considered by those who know about movies to be the true inventor of motion pictures--not the Lumiere brothers; nor Thomas Edison.

Sekuler was to present to the world in 1890 his greatest new invention, the first of its kind--a moving picture machine. He had boarded a train headed from Dijon to Paris, but never arrived at Gare de Lyons station. He and his moving picture machine vanished, never to be heard from again, his claim in history as the inventor of the moving image vanishing with him.

When Whitman tracks down what could be fragments of Sekuler's famously lost film, questions are raised--about Sekuler, about what happened to him and to his invention, and about the film itself.

In this riveting story of suspense, the search for the answers lead to curious riddles that may (or may not) shed light on Sekuler's darkest secret locked away for more than a century, riddles that set in motion a frantic hunt taking Whitman from Los Angeles and Paris, to Geneva, and finally to Sekuler's ancient labyrinthine city of Edinburgh, where the stakes become ratcheted up as the film's riddles lead to a darker, far more dangerous mystery.

Séance Infernale Details

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From Reader Review Séance Infernale for online ebook

Lindsey says

If you, fellow reader, are picking up this book with the expectation that you are about to be treated to a creepy atmospheric ghost story set in Edinburgh, boy do I have some disappointing news for you. While trying to decide how to describe this hot mess of a book I decided to go with "dumpster fire" because of the role fire plays in the plot. It was all over the place, literally. I didn't quite hate it, as it was at least compelling enough to get me to the last page (though it was a HUGE disappointment), but it wasn't quite enjoyable either. It was a real mixed bag.

The Good: The concept of this story could have been so unbelievably cool. Private investigator specializing in rare movie memorabilia finds the first motion picture ever made and discovers a terrifying, supernatural film. Sounds good, right? Yeah, I thought so, too. The problem is that the author didn't commit to this format. The writing was decent in places but it definitely needed a firm, seasoned editor to rein in all of the author's winding tangents. Which brings me to...

The Bad: The plot quickly went from PI hunts down creepy first film to also there's a serial murderer-rapist on the loose. The PI becomes involved in the police investigation due to an unbelievable personal connection, and from there you are reading two different books that are loosely connected. If the author had focused completely on the film, and cut out the side plot of the murderer-rapist, this would have been a very different book, likely a more enjoyable one. It seemed like the side plot was created in order to give our hero a troubled past but the author could have created the same tragic background without filling in the detail. However, his inability to choose a path created a jumbled mess of a plot, with a lot of holes, a lot of flat characters, and a lot of improbable leaps of faith. There were numerous passages in the novel that were inexplicably detailed, such as any time the forensic examiner is talking and when the film expert is explaining how his machinery works. It was as if the author learned these details during the course of his research and wanted to put them in the book even if it was forced. And boring. Like reading a lecture. That is boring. The murder side plot was completely unnecessary, and the two plots lead to a ridiculous ending that made no sense in any way, shape, or form. And then there's....

The Ugly: The narrative layout of this book was, at times, so terrible as to make the book unreadable. The focus shifts between the PI, the detective, and the rapist-murderer (RM). The sections featuring the RM were laughably terrible. Those sections were cliche-ridden, and used imagery that was meant to shock but was really pretty tame. The RM's motivation was never clear, he had a silly connection to the film, and his entire narrative was honestly just stupid. For most of the book the prose is normal but two chapters are, for whatever reason, given gimmicky layouts (one chapter is set to music, for some reason, and the other is scattered across the page, Danielewski-style). Why? I don't know, and the author probably doesn't either.

Overall the book was just okay. I honestly wouldn't recommend it to anyone, though. The author may have a promising future if he can partner with a more experienced editor who can help him focus his ideas.

I received an ARC of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Geoff. Lamb says

This is a fascinating story, filled with lore (mostly true) about who made the first film. That story is set in tandem with the story of a serial killer, the latter of which, for one reader, detracts from the first story line. What one reader would like to see come from this debut novel is a novel that focuses on DS McBride. The rating is 4 stars because, again, for one reader, the end of the novel (Part VII) was really rather a let down.

Frank Díprimi says

great debut novel. Dark, moving psychological thrill. Alex Whitman, a top movie memorabilia dealer hired by Valdano. He goes on a search in Edinburgh for a copy of supposedly the first motion picture ever. There are attempts on his life, his leads disappear or are killed - who is after him and why, is he looking for the movie or his little irl who disappeared years ago

Wart Hill says

The writing is a bit messy but overall it's an interesting story and a good read.

Bosorka says

U některých knih bych potřebovala pestřejší bodovací škálu. A Séance infernale je přesně taková. Během tení jsem několikrát mnila hodnocení ze 4 na 3 body a zase zpět. Knížka se vše dost dobře, je vcelku napínává, pohled k vzniku kinematografie je zajímavý. Určitě okamžiky jsou dost silné. Místy mi připomnělo Poslední desku, kde se hlavní hrdina pro změnu pídí po raritních jazzových nahrávkách. Tady jsou to vše okolo filmu. Oproti Poslední desce je ovšem Séance infernale o hodně vážnější. Co mi ale dost vadilo, byly takové ty zásahy shry, kdy jsou hrdinové v ohrožení života, v bezvýchodných situacích a najednou se stane něco, co je z nich vytáhne, toho tam bylo možná až příliš. Taky chvílkami zmatené vyprávění, kdy jsem si nebyla jistá, jak k němu postavy došly, kolikrát to taky vypadalo, že šlo jen o jakési nevysvětlené vnučkůnky. I tak nakonec zakotvím už hvezd, ale s tím, že bych hodnotila 66 %.

Cat Jenkins says

I was disappointed and had to quit a little over 50 pages in.

The idea and some of the foreshadowing of things to come interested me, but (and I'm really sorry to say this) the writing was just plain bad. So very, very bad. It was like a first-time student of creative writing who tries really REALLY hard to find fresh, new ways to describe things and actions, and completely forgets that without effective communication, there is no story. For instance, here is a passage describing a man walking from his seat into the dining car on a train:

"He traversed into the carriage where the restaurant was located, feeling the crackling barrage blaring from underneath his feet. He ordered a sandwich and sat at a nearby table, jolted by the train's undulations."

That's just one example. The book is rife with these attempts to be more poetic or to jog the reader into

seeing things anew. For me, it was just clumsy and weak and detracted from enjoying the journey of reading. And the inclusion of too much detail regarding cameras and film, etc. was another obstacle. It felt like a case of someone with too much expertise, or someone who's done too much research and wants to use it ALL, no matter the detrimental effect.

Maybe my soul's not poetic enough... But DNF. A shame, because I liked the concept.

David Grassé says

Some brilliant passages and ideas marred by pedestrian plot twists. The writer is probably capable of "Foucault's Pendulum" but got mired in "The DaVinci Code"

The Cannibal says

Messieurs et mesdames de chez Sonatine, vous pouvez bien envoyer des pralines à Amnezik et Stelphique, car sans leurs chroniques (admirer mes rimes), jamais je n'aurais acheté un roman qui faisait un parallèle avec "La Conspiration des ténèbres" de Theodore Roszak !!

Ce roman dont le 4ème me jurait , la main sur coeur : "Emmenez ce livre le matin sur la plage et sachez que vous n'irez pas déjeuner, certainement pas dîner non plus. La Conspiration des ténèbres est hypnotique. On a du mal à s'en relever."

Le roman ne s'est jamais relevé de son vol plané, en effet... Même pas dépassé la page 100 de cette "Conspiration des ténèbres".

Donc, avec un tel postulat de départ, fallait des chroniques en béton armé et une confiance absolue dans mes deux lascars pour acheter le livre !

J'ai eu raison de leur faire confiance car je viens de passer un excellent moment de lecture dans le monde du cinéma.

Voilà un thriller que nos amis cinéphiles peuvent lire, et même ceux qui en savent moins sur le 7ème art, ils iront se coucher moins bête et auront droit à une belle poussée d'adrénaline avec quelques courses afin de résoudre des énigmes, un peu comme dans la carte au trésor, les hélicos en mois et les tueurs aux trousses en plus.

Sans être une mordue de cinéma classiques, hormis quelques titres cités que je ne connaissais pas, pour le reste, c'était dans mes cordes. Donc, le côté ciné ne doit pas vous rebouter, en plus, l'auteur ayant étudié la chose, il nous éclaire vraiment sur le sujet, ce qui ne fait jamais de mal à nos petites cellules grises.

Comme je le disais, ce qui commence par une simple recherche d'un film disparu et dont on n'est même pas sûr qu'il ait existé, va, de pellicule en bobine, se révéler bien plus difficile et plus dangereux qu'il n'y paraissait de prime abord.

Tel un Indiana Jones devenant le professeur Langdon, en moins sexy et moins érudit, notre Alex Whitman va

se retrouver aux prises avec une énigme laissée par Sekuler (à ne pas prononcer à la bruxelloise "Sukkeler" – avoir des difficultés) et quelques cadavres dans les placards.

Ajoutons à cela un tueur en série et des disparitions de petites filles, dont celle de Whitman, il y a 10 ans, et vous comprendrez que dans ce thriller, on ne se contentera pas de fouiner dans des archives à la recherche d'un film et qu'on risque plus gros que des éternuements en cascade.

Mon seul bémol sera pour le fait que dans les livres, les protagonistes arrivent toujours à résoudre les énigmes, quelles qu'elles soient, alors que de mon côté, je rame toujours sur la plupart des contrepèteries du Canard Enchaîné ! Mais bon, sans cela, le roman n'avancerait plus et s'arrêterait au milieu.

Avec une écriture qui pulse, une mise en page qui détonne à certains moments (et qui étonne) et des personnages plaisants, ce thriller se lit en même pas deux jours tant on a envie de savoir ce qui se trame derrière ce foutu film dont personne n'a jamais entendu parler, et surtout, qui sont les gars derrière eux et ce qu'ils veulent.

Non, je ne ferai pas la lumière sur l'affaire, ni ne vous mettrai au courant, z'avez qu'a le lire, tien ! Et puis, où serait le plaisir si je spoliais tout ?

En tout cas, comme quoi les chroniques des blogueurs sont importantes, parce que je le redis haut et fort, sans mes loulous cités plus haut, jamais je n'aurais acheté un livre qui se vantait d'être comme un autre que j'ai fait voler en travers du salon.

Un thriller dont on regrette le clap de fin mais qui, comme un bon film d'action, nous apaise car on sait que nos personnages peuvent dormir en paix : le mystère est levé.

Deborah says

Did this book have even a passing acquaintance with an editor?

1. The timeline is wonky. Augustin Sekuler (a spoof on secular? I'll never know) married his wife in 1885; good. They had two children, great. In 1889, he "convinced [his wife] and the children to secure a suitable New York venue..." Why would children no more than 3 years old have to help with a venue? Furthermore, Augustin disappeared in 1890, and two years before that, in Edinburgh, his daughter Zoe disappeared and was never seen again -- except to help book a venue across the pond a year later, I guess. And the daughter's disappearance happened while her brother, who could have been no older than 2, was left watching her while the mother ran an errand.

2. One historical character is Aleister Crowley, disguised only with the anagrammed name of Carlyle Eistrowe. A historical piece of evidence is a letter from Not-Crowley written in 1889 and far too mature and full of life experience given that Crowley would have been only 14. I'm not sure why Crowley is being at all disguised even if he does turn out to be a villain, as it's widely known he was, to put it bluntly, an evil douche poser. Thomas Edison appears as himself and is clearly depicted as a snaky patent thief.

3. Unfinessed writing. Telling without showing, to the point of presenting parts of the investigation as exposition. Overwritten passages: "...crossing the parking lot of a gas station bathed in the veraman phosphorescence of mercury vapor, he froze in front of the beige-colored Toyota Celica."

4. I was (trying to) read an e-book, and one part said, "On his way to the airport, he made a stop at the xxx(illegible)xxx, and two streets down..." PROOFREAD THE GODDAMN ELECTRONIC SCANS. I will NEVER stop bitching about errors in e-books because nobody can be bothered to double-check and fix things. NEVER. And just in case it reads that way on purpose...

...there are also parts in the Notes that are gibberish, and footnotes that look like Chinese hanzi and Wingdings drank too much ouzo and had a love child. I'm not sure if these are scanning errors or a secret code or if they're just something artsy-fartsy that I don't get, and don't want to, because I'm kinda lowbrow that way. But I suspect this is trying to pull off something like Marisha Pessl's *Night Film* (which I read all the way through against my will and which annoyed the shit out of me) or Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (which I found too pretentious to get more than 75 pages into). Not for me.

Final verdict: It seems like it could be an interesting story, but life is too short and my TBR pile is too high for purple prose and various confusions.

Theresa says

First things first: This book was FANTASTIC.

But be warned: this book is not for everybody. You will encounter obsession, bizarre sexual acts of various kinds, death, rape, murder, profanity and blasphemy, sometimes in bizarre descriptions and in gritty writing. It was definitely different...actually over-the-top in a pulp fiction way. I enjoyed the originality of it and I respect the author's creativity. I enjoyed this book despite its sometimes really graphic language and what have you. I was kept on the edge of my seat trying to figure out what was happening.

The premise is absolutely marvelous and one of the reasons why I was hooked from page one. I always thought of Thomas Edison and the Lumieres brothers as the inventors of film. But it turns out others may have got there first, without ever taking credit for their work. What if the movies were the invention of French man Augustin Sekuler who got on a train ready to unveil his invention but mysteriously vanished forever? The author has taken the real life story of inventor Louis Aimé Augustin Le Prince and crafted a dark and sophisticated suspense mystery thriller around the inventor's disappearance on a train in 1890.

OK, now on to the details.

The book follows Alex Whitman, an expert movie memorabilia dealer as he is hired by a shady movie collector to find Seance Infernale, the first film in history, a film alleged to have been made by the french Sekuler before he vanished on the train bound for Paris in 1890. This proves to be a difficult quest for Whitman as his pursuit leads him to the darkness and mystery of the Scottish city of Edinburgh, the same place where his missing daughter, Ellie, vanished never to be heard from again in a string of disappeared and probably murdered young girls. In the beginning of the story, we realize that the disappearances are still on-going as a dark figure targets further young victims. But what's the link between the current deaths, & events from a century ago?

The search for the film is broken by a parallel investigation into the disappearances by determined young Scottish police detective, DS Georgina McBride, until her search finally meets with Whitman's.

The answers lie deep in history, from the fateful train journey and the horrors of the inventor's life to the

unsettling Swiss countryside and the dark and dingy mysteries of Edinburgh, all leading to the present day.

The book combines pulp fiction, dark history, a Gothic atmosphere, creepy subplots and some unsettling descriptions that made me want to sleep with the light on.

This is also the kind of book that is intricately designed and forces you to half-smile while reading it; very well written, full of witty film references - I liked the nods to the Maltese Falcon, Apocalypse Now, and also the reference to the killer from Fritz Lang's M.

The edge of your seat scavenger hunt revolves a lot around locations in the city of Edinburgh, which really comes alive in this book. I quickly obsessed with the story and the location alike, ever since I started reading the Edinburgh chapters I felt that I was walking around there and the descriptions of the architecture, the old buildings were beautiful. It really gives you this feeling of being there with the characters. There are a lot of references to places and trivia (as well as an extensive reference section) and I kept googling as I was reading to make my experience even better, I even found a wonderful blog that has pictures of the city and that was just brilliant, after reading this book I can't wait for us to visit.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed this book, I was very impressed. It is one of my top reads so far this year.

Highly recommended.

Disclaimer: I received this ARC from the publisher in exchange for an honest review. This in no way affected my opinion of the book, or the content of my review.

Kate says

I don't know why this book didn't get better reviews-I loved it. There were just some parts that I didn't like-that was the flashback cruelty to a cat (I can't handle that stuff) and the horrific description of burnt bodies. Anyway, this book is based on a true mystery-of the man who supposedly really invented the motion picture camera. In reality his name is Louis Le Prince, in the book it's Augustin. He vanished and Edison took credit and filed the patent for the device. People have always suspected foul play but it's an unsolved mystery. The main character's job is searching for lost films and lost film objet's d'art (which is pretty cool!). The book is also a love letter to Edinburgh. You get to go above ground, underground, and to a lot of cool spots in the book that you can google and see IRL. There is also a crime/mystery serial killer thing happening and it all winds together. And at the very end, a nod to gothic ghost stories. So to me, it had it all.

Adam L. says

This is a crazy read. What a ride. Overall I enjoyed this novel. (What does that say about me?) I could have done without some of the more graphic and unsettling descriptions in the story which is really about a man looking for the first film made in history. But all in all this book is oddly entertaining and a good, quick read. It is influenced from Palahniuk, Easton Ellis, Danielewski and Dan Brown.

Alan Darnowsky says

I read this book so you don't have to. The book is sloppily written and edited. At first I thought I was reading a bad translation. The characters are wooden speaking wooden dialogue. The plot makes no sense at all. A lot of the plot depends on the geography of Edinburgh which is confusingly described by the author. This is not the worst book I have ever read. The author does show some promise but he needs to learn how to write.

Jeanie says

It was a bit too violent for my tastes - but that's just my own tastes. It was, without a doubt, thrilling, mysterious and, for those who like their mysteries tempered with psychology - you'll love this book. One of the best parts of it is that he certainly has done his homework. I knew what a ruthless, amoral businessman Edison was, for example, but that information rarely comes out in common cultural references. I'm not saying he actually was involved in this wholly fictional work, but the portrayal is accurate. So were the references to so many of the film industry pioneers.

Jena says

“All those things you fear will reach from into the shadows and pull you down there with them.”

Seance Infernale is an intense thriller following Alex Whitman on his journey to find a piece of film, only rumored to exist. In America, Thomas Edison is credited with building the first camera known to capture motion pictures. In France, the Lumière brothers. But one year before Edison filed his patent, a man named Augustin Sekular is rumored to have built and filmed the world's first motion picture camera. Conveniently, or rather inconveniently, one year before Edison files for his patent, Sekular vanished from a train, never to be seen or heard from again, taking all signs of the camera with him.

However, the man hiring Whitman to find this lost piece of film isn't interested in any of the film strips by Sekular known and catalogued. He wants one so rare, it is only whispered about: Seance Infernale. A film only referred to in a letter by a man known in history to be a conman of sorts.

This book is more than a hunt for rare art. More than a historical mystery yearning to be solved. We learn that Whitman lost his daughter ten years prior. Abducted in a park in Edinburgh and never heard from again, she haunts Whitman. His acceptance of this job, and this hunt for Sekular's film takes him back to the city filled with ghosts. Whitman will have to face his own ghosts, while searching for Sekular's.

“Sources failed to indicate Sekular's exact Edinburgh address, they stated that the family lived in a perilous region, full of seedy businesses, dark alleys, and run-down tenements, a place “where wickedness loses its seductive appeal by manifesting in all its depravity.”

Whitman isn't the only perspective we get; however. In addition to his hunt for this mythical film, a Detective Sergeant, Georgina McBride is hunting an elusive creature of a different sort. A serial killer prowling the streets of Edinburgh, kidnapping children and leaving their bodies in alleys. Georgina needs to

find his latest victim while there's still a chance they are alive.

Two different people searching for two different things, and yet their paths cross in unpredictable ways. But the more each of them discovers, the more they realize their searches are more dangerous than either one ever anticipated.

“Because a murder investigation is first and foremost a hired investigation; your client may be silent and dead, but he is still screaming out for justice.”

This book shocked me! I was expecting a hunt through time to solve a lost mystery. But, the present day twists with McBride's serial killer hunt kept me on my toes! It was easy to lulled into the mystery of this lost film, and what happened to Sekular. As soon as you got comfortable in that story, you were slammed into the present day with the hunt for this killer. In addition, we get some narration from Elliot, the killer himself, told in such a way that you aren't sure who he is going to end up being, or why he is important to Whitman and this film.

There is graphic violence in this book, both in what Elliot does to his victims and some flashbacks of other scenes in characters lives. One particular scene of animal cruelty was two pages I skipped, it was that grotesque. So, if that sort of violence unnerves you or makes you queasy, this may not be the book for you.

As far as dark thrillers, this book is crazy dark and crazy intense. I was climbing the walls, reading between my fingers, and definitely leaving the lights on to make it through this book! The author does a fantastic job weaving characters in and out of the plot, and just when you've forgotten about someone, they pop back in to play. He has a talent for making you look to the left and then hitting you from the right. Every twist and turn was like plummeting down a roller coaster blind folded. It is exhilarating but also terrifying.

My favorite parts are when we are taken below ground into ancient and forgotten parts of Edinburgh. Areas simply entombed over in the name of progress. Skariton does an insane job bringing places to life. I could taste the dust and smell the stale air as crypts and catacombs were discovered and explored. And nothing says creepy more than underground houses, forgotten tunnels and old graveyards.

“You could have walked past it every day on the way to work and you wouldn't have noticed it, padlocked behind doors or hidden underground. It was right there, for everyone to see, yet it was unknown. But that was Edinburgh, revealing itself only in the constant vigilance of dark, steady eyes.”

I did read this as an ARC, so there were some pieces that seemed incomplete. I don't mean the writing, it's more the presentation of the book. This is a book that has art within the book, and with those pieces missing, it felt a little confusing. Some were there, but notes at the bottom and the notes in the back seemed to not quite be finished, so I didn't feel that I got the entire experience.

The hardest thing, and again, this may be fixed in a final copy, is there weren't any years in the chapter headers. The book is divided into sections with the date (month and day) listed at the beginning of each section. But, the narration jumps between the years quite a bit and it can get confusing, especially as we are reading between multiple points of view. It isn't overwhelming, but I did have to backtrack a few times to figure out where I was supposed to be.

In all, this book was perfect for October reading and for the #spookathon. It will leave your heart racing and your stomach churning as you hold your breath waiting to read the outcome. If you like dark, if you love thrillers, and you don't mind some intense violence, this book is definitely for you!

I won this in a giveaway from AA Knopf, and was not required or obligated to review.
