

# Reviews

## Book Review

### ***The Man They Couldn't Hang: A Tale of Murder, Mystery and Celebrity***

A play by Michael Crowley  
Publisher: Waterside Press  
(2010)  
ISBN: 9781872870670  
(paperback)  
Price: £14.95 (paperback)

If you are going to write a play about a hanging, it's got to be a comedy. So says author and playwright Michael Crowley, who is writer in residence at HMYOI Lancaster Farms. In this case, not just a comedy, but one that takes its cue from the tradition of the Victorian music hall.

*The Man They Couldn't Hang* is based around the strange but true story of John Lee who, having been convicted of the 1884 Babbacombe murder, stood three times on the gallows and survived to tell the tale. The bungled execution quickly became the stuff of legend as Lee was reprieved to serve 22 years in prison, mostly at hard labour, much in solitary confinement. Throughout that time and after, Lee proclaimed his innocence and, on release, made a living from telling the tale of his escape from the jaws of death.

Crowley's remarkable work conjures up a fictional meeting between the recently released Lee and his would-be executioner, James Berry. The meeting is not by chance, but organised by failing theatre-owner Douglas Fawcett and Berry's theatrical agent Henry Cheetham. Their vision, or at least the vision of the cynical and aptly-named agent, is to produce a show in which Berry and Lee recreate the infamous execution on the music hall stage, working gallows and all.

And when a combination such as this is contrived, you know you

are going to be witness to a catastrophe on a grand scale. But how will it unfold? What will become of the man they couldn't hang? Will it end in comedy, tragedy or sheer farce?

Set in 1907, the year of a strike by music hall artists, *The Man They Couldn't Hang* raises many questions about crime and punishment and their respective entertainment values. The story begins in the office of down-at-heel Fawcett, as the agent Cheetham arrives to sell him his latest act, the former hangman Berry.

Berry, already a stage act, does a turn telling the story of his life as an executioner. He can talk about the men and women he has hanged, the methods and materials he used, as well as describing what he sees as less humane methods of execution, such as the Spanish garrote and beheading by sword, all aptly illustrated from his collection of grisly artefacts.

After some success with these lectures, tacked on to the usual music hall ribaldry, Fawcett and Cheetham conspire to add a further element to the show — to bring together hangman and hanged man or, rather, hangman and almost hanged man.

Crowley's work is intriguing in its multiplicity of interpretation possibilities. Is it a straightforward historical work, an anti-capital punishment polemic or a critique of modern mass media values? Why, the script begs, is the audience entertained by the prospect of a good hanging? And why are we, the real audience, entertained by the prospect of a fictional audience being entertained by the prospect of a good hanging?

There's plenty of humour in it — gallows humour of course. For instance (if you can imagine the timing of a music hall delivery):-

**Berry:** 'Sorry about the other night. How is the young lad?'

**Henry:** 'He's fine, James. Don't you worry about him.'

**Douglas:** 'You need to be more careful with that sword.'

The dramatic development in the play, as I have read it, is sometimes too contrived, however, and the dialogue more than a little stilted. In places, it doesn't quite flow. Nevertheless, this work would undoubtedly provide a wealth of meaty material for any drama workshop worth its name, whether inside or outside of the prison wall. I hope to have the opportunity to see it performed some time, if only to have a good laugh at a good (or rather bad) hanging.

Question is, who will have the last laugh: the audience in the play, the audience watching the audience in the play, or perhaps the author watching the audience watching the audience in the play?

**Ray Taylor** is a prison officer at HMP Pentonville in London.

## Book Review

### ***Female Sexual Offenders Theory, Assessment and Treatment***

Edited by Theresa A. Gannon and Franca Cortoni  
Publisher: Wiley-Blackwell  
ISBN: 978-0-470-68343-9  
(paperback) 978-0-470-68344-6  
(hardback)  
Price: £29.99 (paperback) £65.00  
(hardback)

Despite the fact that female sexual offenders have always existed, it has only been in the last 10 or more years that research and treatment efforts designed specifically with women in mind have begun to gain ground. It is