

Daniel O'Thunder Review from www.quillandquire.com

To a certain literary sensibility, the phrase “historical novel” has become shorthand for pretty much everything that is wrong with contemporary “literary” fiction. We’ve come to expect these books to be long-winded, conventional morality tales (reflecting modern norms of morality, of course), composed in an inflated, artificial style thought to be the way people wrote in ye olde days, and, it almost goes without saying, dull beyond endurance. It’s easy to forget that in the days of Sir Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas, the historical novel was a form of popular entertainment and escapist fun. That tradition is still alive today, but it is becoming an increasingly rare thing.

Daniel O'Thunder, by screenwriter-turned-novelist Ian Weir, is that rare thing. The titular hero is a veteran pugilist in mid-19th-century London who also runs a mission house. A rag-tag group – including a fallen minister, a foul-mouthed child prostitute, a hack journalist, and an old army comrade – are swept into Daniel’s orbit and take turns narrating the story, which builds up to the fighter challenging the Devil himself (“with all his Infernal Powers”) to a bare-knuckled bout, London Prize Ring rules.

Weir’s plot steps smartly, and the language crackles with the immediacy of shifting first-person voices. Passages detailing historical background and mood are given less emphasis than the well-paced, character-driven, action-filled narrative. There are murders, rapes, hangings, prizefights, a city-wide riot, and lots of thrilling escapes. “Bangs and whizzes – startling effects – characters who shriek and stab and get on with it,” is how one character, a theatre director, explains how to grab an audience; it’s a lesson Weir has already learned.

He also has more than a few plot twists up his sleeve. By the time the novel reaches its dramatic conclusion, set in the Klondike during the gold rush, the story has landed in a place somewhere between dementia and the supernatural. All of which makes for an historical novel that is a lot more fun and thrilling than what we have come to expect.

Reviewed by Alex Good (from the December 2009 issue)