

The Fatal Tree by Jake Arnott review – a double helping of love and loss

Jake Arnott's fictionalised adventures of a notorious 18th-century prostitute vividly captures London's world of thieves – and the precarious life of his gay narrator

The capture and hanging of the infamous thief and jailbreaker Jack Sheppard in 1724 made headline news and his rackets life story was turned into a sensational biography by **Daniel Defoe**. In Defoe's account, Elizabeth Lyon – the lover Sheppard denounced before his death – “laid the foundation of his ruin” when she first met him, setting him on the path to the gallows. In *The Fatal Tree*, Jake Arnott redresses the balance, offering a fictional account of one of history's footnotes, Lyon, AKA Edgworth Bess.

Set in the time that saw the birth of modern journalism, Arnott gives control of the narrative to a hack writer, the entirely fictional William Archer, who sends the account in sections to his publisher, John Applebee. Bess recounts, from her prison cell, her life as a serving girl in the Middlesex village of Edgworth (now Edgware) and the scandal that saw her evicted and drawn into a life of crime and prostitution. From there, her story plunges the reader into the underworld of early 18th-century London, the city we recognise from William Hogarth's *Gin Lane*, a barely contained free-for-all. In this world of punks, prigs, jades and mollies, a tenuous companionship of thieves and misfits, ruled over by thief-taker general Jonathan Wild (himself the subject of an account by Defoe), everyone is just a snitch away from deportation, or worse, a trip to Tyburn's fatal tree. So far, so *Moll Flanders*.

However, Arnott also offers the reader a second – and no less fascinating – story in the form of Archer's accompanying letters to Applebee. The letters unfold a tale as fraught with intrigue and misfortune as Bess's own. Archer is a character who is truly on the outside. His involvement with the corrupt thief-taker general puts him beyond the law and though he befriends the poet John Gay and brushes shoulders with both Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, his class prevents him from joining the literary establishment. It is his homosexuality, however, that puts him at the mercy of others and forces him on to society's outskirts. As much as the reader fears for Bess's probable fate, it is Archer whose life often seems most precarious and fraught.

The narrative is woven through with vividly portrayed characters, from Bess and Jack themselves to the superbly realised, wonderfully named Punk Alice and Poll Maggot, the transvestite Princess Seraphina; and the mixed-race heavy, Blueskin. Arnott delights too in the secret language of thieves and the narrative is peppered liberally with phrases such as “buttock-and-twang” and “riding dragon on St George”.

Frequent use of street slang does hamper the pace and flow of the novel, though, as the reader stops to consult the glossary, especially during the early chapters. And while Arnott's research is meticulous, it is sometimes also conspicuous, occasionally detracting from the remarkable twin tales of love and loss that sit at the heart of this novel.

• *The Fatal Tree* by Jake Arnott is published by Sceptre (£16.99). To order a copy for £12.74 go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99