



## Dark Remains

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## **Dark Remains** Sean McMahon

London, 1842. England is in turmoil and one young woman must carry the demands of both the living and the dead.

After the death of her mother and imprisonment of her revolutionary father, thirteen-year-old Maggie Power is plunged into a world of poverty and violence. Promising to protect her younger brother - come what may - she scavenges upon the mudflats of the Thames, haunted by the constant shadows of hunger and disease.

That is, until a chance encounter with a charitable countess, who rescues her from the brutal streets of 19th century London. But Maggie's troubles are just beginning. For the rich life presented to her by the mysterious countess comes at a dreadful price. Slowly she realises she must free herself of the influence of her benefactor - whose dark motives are revealed over the course of the turbulent summer of 1842.

A suspenseful, historical mystery, *Dark Remains* takes the reader on a journey through the dark heart of early Victorian London.

"Fine characterization...and skilled pacing make this a real page-turner." Publishers Weekly on this 2011 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award Semi Finalist.

## **Dark Remains Details**

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Author : Sean McMahon

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## From Reader Review Dark Remains for online ebook

### Tracey says

I won a copy of this book through LibraryThing's Member Giveaways. I always feel badly about not being able to heap praise on one of these. I enjoyed the beginning... It's a powerful idea – two young children left on their own in 1842 London, their comfortable early life contrasting hideously with being reduced to prayer and scavenging to get by on the filthy, terrifying waterfront.

Unfortunately, I first got angry at the adult characters, and then at the writer, and then just became baffled, and it all went downhill from there.

This is the abridged review (believe it or not) - the whole thing's on my blog.

The children – Maggie, 13, and her little brother, ten-year-old Thomas – are alone in the world because their father, a Chartist activist, was caught, convicted, and transported, and their mother was broken by the stress of it and died. At the beginning of the book the kids decide they should try to locate Mr. Turner, mentioned in their father's letters as someone who could help the family. Why did their mother never go to him? Pride? Regardless, it's now find this gentleman or turn to a life of crime, or die, and the two set off into the mean streets of London.

The streets aren't the only things that are mean: the children are trapped by a group of very young thieves straight out of *Oliver Twist* and no matter how hard they try can't seem to escape them; though they have nothing themselves, it's their own selves which have the potential to be valuable to the group, as Maggie can participate in a seduction-robbery of some rich drunken toff. Finally, though, they find the old gentleman, only to see him kidnapped by scoundrels and end up right back with the street gang ... after which they and one of the gang, Jack, are taken up by a sweet little old lady and the story goes from *Oliver Twist* to *Hansel and Gretel*.

Honestly, it was kind of a mess.

The beginning, as I said, had some hope in it. It was a good depiction of the vicious circle of homelessness: you have no place to wash and nothing clean to wear, so "decent" folk, including the police, automatically assume the worst of you and want nothing but to be shut of you, and so you and your clothes become dirtier and more ragged, and any opportunity for anything better slips further and further away. But before long I was just utterly confused as to what story this was trying to tell. The story from Maggie's point of view is intercut with her dreams in the present tense – effectively nightmarish – and also bits and pieces the reader could not otherwise know from assorted letters, articles, and other papers from other sources. A good idea – but unfortunately a bit scattershot in execution.

The middle of the book, as I mentioned, takes a wild fairy tale turn as the kids are scooped up by a Countess who promises to give them everything they could possibly imagine and then some, but who just might not be as benevolent as she seems. It was a bizarre turn for the story to take, and almost trivialized by being a detour, popping up a good ways in and wrapped up tidily well before the end in a muted climax that featured a strange sort of deus-ex-machina.

I very quickly lost patience with the children's father, Thomas Power. You've got a cause and a fire in your belly and you're willing to sacrifice yourself for the greater good? Dandy. Go for it – unless you have a

fragile wife and two young children who, if they lose you, will be reduced to abject penury. All I could think every time the narrative cut in one of the father's letters was *How dare you? How dare you put yourself into a position in which you abandon your family to almost certain death? How could you?* Whether it was thoughtlessness, overconfidence in himself and his wife and Turner, or blind zeal, the end result was his wife's grim and bitter death and the deep suffering of his children, and there was no amount of yay-he's-a-hero-for-the-Cause that was going to alleviate that.

The reason the children's mother earned my anger is something of a spoiler, so we'll just take it as read. It's the least of my problems with the book. It could be argued that the fact that I was angry with the characters means they were real enough to spark an emotion in me; it could also be argued that they were written as idiots and it was their thoughtless stupidity that made me angry. Which – well, actually, that means they do in fact have a lot in common with a lot of real people, so – go them.

It was the writing, both in its rambliness and its grim and bitter need for editing, which made me a bit angry with the writer. I was annoyed with the weird left turn into lurid sensationalism; I was much more annoyed that the children quite simply did not speak like children. Everyone – from the French Countess to Cockney Jack to Blake to Mr. Turner – sounded pretty much the same, except for occasional dropped-in stereotypical words.

Does the line (spoken by Maggie) "There might be blood, guys" sound Victorian? "Guys"?? Really?

Most of all, though, because it should have been the easiest thing to fix, I was annoyed with the slipshod spelling, grammar, and punctuation:

- "Say what you want, Gentlemen" (why the capital?)
- "Like outlaws they laid low" (what is a low, and where did they lay it?)
- "Eventually, however, he came to heal." (Should, in case it isn't clear, be "came to heel" – not even getting into the connotations of the phrase)
- "the dinning room" (\*flinch\*)
- "those hated, London streets" (why the comma?)
- "Maggie wondered around the empty house" (yes, it should be "wandered": not the same word)
- and my favorite: "'What about, Jack?'" (which wasn't a query to Jack about what he might be referring to, but was supposed to be a query about him: "What about Jack?")

Say what you want, Gentlemen, about nit-picking, but truly, really, honestly – commas are important. In that last example the comma creates a completely different sentence from what was intended. "You know what I mean" just doesn't cut it when this is something people are expected to pay money for – there's really no excuse for it. I just found an old review of mine, and I'm recycling a line from it: when there are as many nits as this, it's hard not to pick them.

No, wait – my favorite erratum might have actually been this, from one of Maggie's nightmares: "Then up bobs a decapitated leg to the surface". How, exactly, do you decapitate a leg? I think I actually gave a little cry of dismay at that one.

There were plenty of places where I found the choice of words questionable, such as:

- Referring to two men who just viciously beat up an apparently nice old man as "the younger gentlemen" (Is "gentlemen" really appropriate here?)
- "It informed them that their package of hope was lost" (– Er?)
- "Marie ... thrust him into her arms to comfort him" (can you thrust someone into your own arms?)

I think that with some strong guidance and - do I really need to say a masterful editor? - this could have been a fine book. As it is, I, sadly, have a bit of regret for the time I spent on it.

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### **R.G. Phelps says**

#### **Too dark for me...**

Again I have completed a book without really enjoying it. Sean McMahon's storyline was just too dark for me to make a positive review about. I'm not sure if it follows a true historical event but can affirm the title given, Dark Remains, was totally appropriate. Again, I blame myself for not reading more of the reviews before jumping in with my eyes closed to any adverse comments. Reading a story about two children, 13 and 10, fending for themselves on the streets of London in the mid-1800's wasn't a good start and it was downhill from that point forward. I cannot in good conscious recommend this dark story to additional readers...

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### **Mike Davis says**

This was an entertaining read as a YA novel. Inspired by early British demands for democracy, and laced with a mystery encountered by a group of three young abandoned children, the story is easy to follow and contains sufficient turns to maintain interest. There are incidents which call for ethical judgement, and would be worthy of group or classroom discussion. Although it is not a complex tale, there are some revelations that surface later that keep the reader guessing.

This novel was received from the publisher in eBook format in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Amy Siggelow says**

I won this book from the Member Giveaways on LibraryThing.

This book was not what I expected. I struggled through the first half of the book, but was determined to finish it. It started getting interesting for me about halfway through.

This is a story set in London's past. Three children are taken from the streets to a mansion outside London, owned by a Countess. These children are treated like royalty, but soon learn that something sinister is happening on the grounds of the mansion.

Not a bad story; I did like the ending which was mostly happy after the rest of the book could be construed as dark and dismal due to the story's premise.

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### **Sean McMahon says**

Publishers Weekly Review of my Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award (Young Adult Fiction Section) Semi

Finalist 2011.

This powerful historical novel vividly evokes London in 1842 and the terrifying plight of 13-year-old Maggie Power and her younger brother Tom. With their mother dead and father unjustly imprisoned because he's a Chartist - a group fighting for the rights of the working class - the pair is left to endure a bleak existence as street children. Living in a shack and scrounging the river banks for discarded items they can sell for food assures them certain death either by starvation or disease. But they do have one recourse and in desperation turn to a former friend of their father, Mr Turner. Turner takes Maggie and Tom under his wing, but is then murdered by two of their father's enemies. Now fearing for their lives, the children fall in with a rough gang of delinquents who promise them protection in exchange for criminal cooperation. As their young lives become one bad experience after another, they learn that things are seldom what they seem and that few people are trustworthy. Fine characterization - at least for Maggie - and skilled pacing make this a real page-turner.

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### **Susan Anderson says**

DARK REMAINS, a young adult novel by Sean McMahon, is the story of two damaged children and the harrowing journey of their survival.

Told from the point of view of the thirteen-year old heroine, the story deals with poverty, abandonment, and cruelty to children in the 1840s, long before the great social reformers of the early twentieth century took up the plight of society's abused.

I loved this book. Reading it was exciting, like the first read of OLIVER TWIST. Mr. McMahon's prose sparkles. His sense of history shines. The seamy side of 1840s London comes alive in the pages of DARK REMAINS.

It is 1842 and Maggie Powers and her younger brother, Tom, are mudlarking on the banks of the Thames. From the first sentence, we are caught up in the story:

"There was no reply. Maggie cupped her hands to her mouth - ready to call once more, when a small boat, drifting down the centre of the river, caught her eye and distracted her for a moment."

Their mother is dead, their father imprisoned because of his role in Chartism, one of the earliest worker movements. Led by Maggie, the two children search for food, shelter, and Mr. Turner, a friend of their father who is bound to help.

Although Maggie has the perception and moral compass of an adult, even she can be tricked. Before their odyssey ends, brother, sister, and sidekick, Jack, take up with Charlie and his gang of homeless children, scavenge for food, have a brush or three with the law, are pursued or assisted by vivid characters worthy of Charles Dickens. They witness murders in the dark of night, meet and are kept by the haunting Countess Jouvente who claims to have fled persecution in France. The ending features the redoubtable Mr. Blake, a character modeled after England's early detectives.

There are adventures in every paragraph, twists at every page turn. Action is punctuated by letters or quotes from documents having to do with the Chartist movement or with the imprisonment and appeal of Thomas

Powers.

I highly recommend the book to readers of all ages who love a breathless adventure and want to be transported to another time in history.

**About the Author.** Sean McMahon lives in Liverpool, England and Dark Remains is his debut novel. He is currently working on the second novel in the series, and hopes to publish it sometime during 2012.

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### **Doug Bower says**

This is an excellent historical fiction novel. It takes place in England in the late 1800s and is told from the perspective of Maggie, a teenage girl who is left to care for her brother Thomas on the streets of London. Their father is a leader in the movement to improve conditions for the working class and is imprisoned on charges of creating a riot and other charges against the crown. This sends the family into poverty and they have to become scavengers just to stay alive. Soon the mother dies, leaving just the children. The children try to find a friend of their father who they then seen murdered and whoever did it wants them dead. They then meet a wonderful rich woman who wants to help them or does she? The story is extremely well written and you begin to feel as if you are along for the journey. There is lots of action and interesting twists and turns. I would highly recommend this book.

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### **Charlotte Phillips says**

It was a sort of fantasy novel without it being a fantasy novel. It was the kind of novel that made it different and made it more interesting in many other ways that books tend to fail in. I liked the concept of the novel and felt that it was engaging in its own sort of way because I was able to relate with the characters without getting fully engaged with them and with what they were expressing and stating. I loved the overall depth of the novel and the time it was set within. I think all to many authors forget that the time element is important to a novel, because that can sometimes help you to really put the picture together and then to become more involved.

The storyline itself, I wouldn't say it was a brilliant one. I think there is much room for improvement but it was still a good plot. It was the factor that you never really knew what was happening, or who could and could not be trusted. It almost had that sort of oliver twist feel to it, what with the two young kids just trying to make there way to somewhere safe in life. I think that the objectives of the novel are perhaps a little unclear and unclarified because for me it almost felt like there was a big hollow gap, where there was something missing, something that should have been there but wasn't.

Could this be better produced were the plot dragged out with more depth and detail and perhaps produced into a sequel, maybe. I think this would give it so much more room to grow and to really grasp the readers with everything that it has to offer. I don't think it would be the be all and end all of it, but I do think it would give it that much bigger and more extra room for growth and development in its own sort of style and way.

