

There were two things that attracted to me to the story of Dr Hawley Harvey Crippen. The first was the manner by which he tried to escape arrest, by assuming a new identity and travelling across the Atlantic on the *Montrose* with his lover, Ethel LeNeve, disguised as his son. When I first started to research the story I quickly realised that this was a device which could be used both for comic effect and for a study of gender relationships. Although Ethel's disguise was quite effective it was to prove Crippen's undoing, for it was when the captain of the ship observed 'Mr John Robinson', as he styled himself, becoming amorous with his 'son' late at night that suspicions were raised. In my novel *Crippen*, Ethel begins to rather enjoy being a boy, although the effect she has on a man-crazy fellow passenger proves more of a challenge to her.

The second thing which I found interesting about Crippen's story is the reputation which has followed him over the last century. There is a tendency to consider him one of the more cold-blooded serial killers in British history. However, Dr Crippen only committed one murder, that of his wife Cora, so his tenancy of the Chamber of Horrors does seem a little unfair. I've tried to take a more sympathetic view of the man, examining his upbringing and relationship with the women in his life, as well as taking a speculative glance at the events of the night in question.

I've written three novels now that take place in the past. The first, *The Thief of Time*, skips through 256 years of world history; the second, *The Congress of Rough Riders*, finds its setting in the American Wild West of the 19th century. For the most part, *Crippen* takes place at the turn of the twentieth century so I feel I am getting closer and closer to writing in a contemporary setting. However I continue to resist that as I enjoy the challenges of historical novels. I find that when one begins research on a story set in the past one can find the most entertaining anecdotes and curious period details which can help to surround the characters, plot and themes of the novel and make the reading experience a more enriching one. For *Crippen*, the detail of life aboard ship as well as the daily lifestyle of a down-on-his-luck doctor in turn of the century London necessitated a lot of research on my part but as one reads documents and court papers and writers of the period, ideas for dozens of other stories spring to life.

The challenge of a historical crime novel is that those things which are used today to track and entrap criminals were not available to the detectives of the past. The cat and mouse game between Crippen and Inspector Dew after Cora's death is one based on conversation and character study, not forensics and fingerprinting. Although as chance would have it, the ship on which Crippen crossed the Atlantic was the first to have the new Marconi telegraph installed on it; without this there would have been no way for Captain Kendall to have alerted Scotland Yard to his presence on-board the *Montrose* and Dew would never have given chase.

I think of *Crippen* as a love story, a murder mystery, a whodunnit, and a chase story all rolled into one. But at its heart is a study of one man who may have been judged a little unfairly by history. Time to set the record straight and give the devil his due.