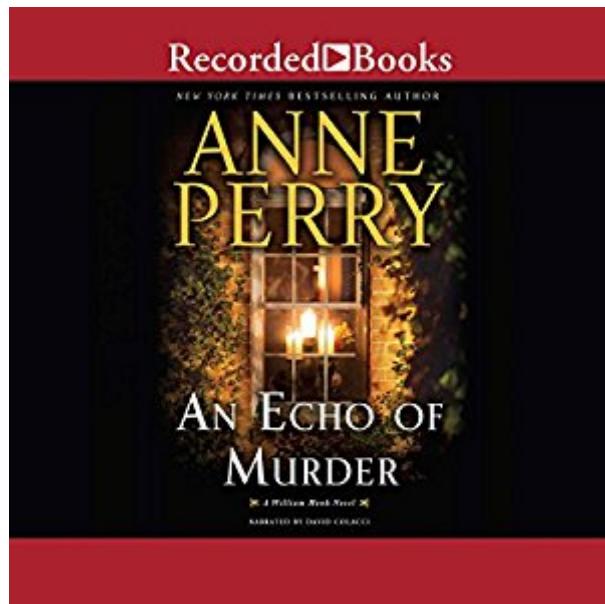


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An Echo Of Murder



Synopsis

A string of gruesome, ritualistic murders of Hungarian immigrants has the Thames River police commander stuck on solving the pattern in the latest installment of the New York Times best-selling William Monk series. When a Hungarian immigrant is dismembered near London's River Thames, Commander Monk is called to the eerie scene, where 16 candles surround the corpse. As identical murders pop up around the city, Monk confronts the unsettling options: could it be the work of a secret society? A serial madman? Or is a xenophobic Brit targeting foreigners? A local doctor who speaks Hungarian from his days on the battlefield may be able to help, but his own struggles with post-traumatic stress have left his memory in shambles: could he have committed the crimes without remembering? Fighting both local prejudice and the weight of the past, Monk and his wife Hester - herself a battlefield nurse familiar with horror - are in a race to find the killer and stop the echo of these repeated murders for good.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As a resident of both the U.S. and Scotland, Anne Perry is undoubtedly familiar with the populism and xenophobia rampant in the world. That awareness seems to be the central theme of this latest Monk book. A London citizen points out his Hungarian neighbors "don't belong here." Hester Monk muses about prejudice that the "cause could be anything from speech you did not understand . . . to threats to your job or change to your familiar neighborhood" but the "worst fear of all was that people of another faith would make you question your own belief in your place and value in the world." When I was a child, we visited relatives in a small community and a little cousin pointed out

where, he said with a sneer, Hungarians lived. "Really?" asked my father. "What does 'Hungarian' mean?" The cousin pondered a minute and replied "Hungarians are people who live with bears." Anne Perry has captured such blind prejudice quite well in this book. She also gives a visceral image of the horrors of the Crimean War and updates readers on the progress of Scuff and Crow and their efforts to provide medical care to the poor of London. The mystery itself doesn't fare quite so well. A bit of evidence discovered part way through the book makes the villain obvious to readers, but Monk doesn't see the implications until very late, and then in a rather off-hand manner. This is a dark book, made darker by the realization that little progress seems to have been made to alleviate prejudice from Monk's time to present day.

The Monk series has always been my favorite of Perry's, largely because of Monk's complex history. In this novel, Monk is his usual fascinating self and their adopted son, Scuff, has come into his own as a doctor in training. It is his wife, Hester's family history and Crimean experiences we get more background on and involvement in. A doctor from her past in the Crimea reappears and seems to have a possible connection to a new series of gruesome murders in the Hungarian immigrant community. He has a severe case of PTSD from the war. Is his trauma enough to make him a homicidal maniac? He came back to England from the Crimea through Hungary. Did something happen there to give him a motive? Or are the murders attributable to some delusion of his? My one criticism is that the evidence seems rather sparse to suspect him of murder, although maybe the historical setting makes it possible. I have to admit I suspected much of the conclusion of the murder from the beginning, but the way there, especially the character development, was interesting enough to hold my attention. As usual, barrister Oliver Rathbone becomes involved and there is plenty of suspense until the end. Perry fans won't be disappointed and those unacquainted with the series should still enjoy this - although I recommend them starting from the beginning to get all the references.

Across two long and still growing series of novels, about detectives Thomas Pitt and William Monk, Perry has used the business of crime to write about the serious social issues that affected Victorian England. In style and form, her books, always well plotted and narrated, are a modern style redaction of the early great detective novels of authors like Wilkie Collins or novels of manners and character like those of Trollope. They are a lot shorter in length than their forebears and the depictions of women in them much more nuanced and understanding, but if Dickens had been a twenty-first-century woman novelist, rather than a nineteenth-century man, he would have

sympathized with her viewpoint and her characters. And maybe it's Dickens she's most like as a writer — the same venue (mostly London), the same range of characters, the same use of local color, and the same use of fiction to expose social and moral- wrongs. Another similarity, which is all to the good — neither author flogs the reader over the head with these issues: they just expose themselves over the course of a colorful story. Writing in the Victorian mode also allows the writer a good deal of leeway in exotica: the stories can veer toward the outré or fantastic without breaking wholly with realism. (When you read a novel like this, you realize how much you've missed this kind of storytelling.) For those new to the William Monk series, Monk is a former private detective. He woke up one day remembering nothing about his past life. Over several novels, Perry has described his pursuit of knowledge about his past life. He finally got enough but what he learned most of all was that he no longer wanted to be the kind of person he was before he became amnesiac. Among the way, he met, became enamored of, and married Hester, a nurse who had worked at Florence Nightingale's side in the Crimean War. She has her own troubled memories of a ghastly, savage war for which the British were totally unprepared, emotionally and physically. Hester is involved at Monk's side in this book as in others but is not as constant a player. Monk now heads the Thames River Police. Being a policeman of any kind is somewhat non-U in Monk's and Hester's England, but he bears the title of Commander Monk now, and is a properly respectable Englishman. The case this time involves a dead Hungarian, one of a small but growing community of emigres from that troubled country from mid-century on (think, Revolutions of 1848). The man is not only dead, brutally stabbed, but his body is surrounded by candles, seventeen in all. Is his murder a cult activity or was he killed by someone resentful of the presence of these foreigners in London? More murders follow. Parts of the plot stretch coincidence more than one would usually be comfortable with, but it works in this setting and style. The result is good detecting, ending in a last-minute unveiling of dark truths in a courtroom. Along the way, subtle markers are dropped to make parallel what appears in the book (mistrust of foreigners, post-traumatic stress syndrome, the status of the poor, women's place in a resolutely man's world) and what we experience today. The result is a thoroughly satisfying tale of detection and an immersion in an alien world that isn't all that different than ours in some of the problems it faces (or ignores).

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