



The Great Stink

Clare Clark

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Clare Clark's critically acclaimed *The Great Stink* "reeks of talent" (*The Washington Post Book World*) as it vividly brings to life the dark and mysterious underworld of Victorian London. Set in 1855, it tells the story of William May, an engineer who has returned home to London from the horrors of the Crimean War. When he secures a job transforming the city's sewer system, he believes that he will be able to find salvation in the subterranean world beneath the city. But the peace of the tunnels is shattered by a murder, and William is implicated as the killer. Could he truly have committed the crime? How will he bring the truth above-ground?

With richly atmospheric prose, *The Great Stink* combines fact and fiction to transport readers into London's putrid past, and marks the debut of a remarkably talented writer in the tradition of the very best historical novelists.

The Great Stink Details

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Author : Clare Clark

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From Reader Review The Great Stink for online ebook

Bryce says

Extremely uneven; large sections of the book are tremendously compelling, but equally long sections are very, very tedious. Still, the setting is interesting and the characters are unusual. Worth a read.

Ron Charles says

Clare Clark's first novel starts in the gutter and goes downhill from there. But that's entirely appropriate for her fantastic thriller set in mid-19th century London, where "on a hot day the stink could knock you flat." Most of the action in this outrageous story takes place in the sewers swelling with excrement from 2 million people. If cleaning your bathroom turns you green or the thought of using the toilet plunger raises your gorge, jump immediately to the next review. In this novel, poop happens. And happens. Clark's description of the city is so odoriferous that you'd think it was printed on scratch-'n-sniff paper:

"The smell was solid and brown as the river itself," she writes of the Thames, from which Londoners drew their drinking water. "It grinned its great brown grin and kept on going, brazen as you like, a great open stream of shit through the very centre of the capital, the knobbls and lumps of rich and poor jostling and rubbing along together, faces turned up to the sky. . . . The water was so dense and brown it seemed that it should bear a man's weight."

Before turning up your nose, though, get a whiff of the plot that wafts through this novel. In rich Dickensian detail, Clark creates the whole city teeming with life and decay, but she keeps the focus on a few fascinating characters in desperate straits. Chief among them is William May, an engineer working on the most awesome civil project of the age: the construction of a new sewer system as large and complex as the city above it, complete with its own network of roads and alleys, settling pools for fountains, and pump stations as grand as cathedrals -- an infernal reflection of London, except that it's all pitch black, surging with unspeakable sludge and populated by millions of rats. Commissioned at extraordinary expense and over the objections of London's autonomous boroughs, a new sewer is the last best hope for saving the city from intolerable conditions, including the epidemics of cholera, dysentery and typhoid that sweep through the population with alarming frequency.

William, an emotionally scarred veteran of the Crimean War, throws himself into this work, hoping to quiet the memories of that ghastly military adventure. He reminds himself again and again that a successful engineer is "regular in his habits, steady, disciplined, methodical in his problem-solving." William is ordinarily a paragon of those virtues, but when the pressure of maintaining that regulated life becomes too much for him, he slinks deep into the sewer to slash his arms and thighs with a knife.

Clark has created a tragic, deeply sympathetic man, incapable of reconciling the horrors of his battle experience with the prim regularity of Victorian life. At home, he's a gentle husband to his ferociously cheery wife; at the office, he's an aloof but brilliant engineer. But sometimes -- oh, sometimes -- the strain is overwhelming, and only the knife can relieve him, make him feel alive, provide him with a pain "on the outside . . . something he could hold on to, something he could control." The wincing detail of these self-mutilation scenes raises the novel's pitch -- which is always high -- to a shriek.

Clark can explain everything about the 80 miles of London sewer tunnels from elevation vectors to brick density, but she also knows how to hyperventilate the gothic horror of this subterranean world, soaring into

fits of narrative excess that recall the strange pleasure of reading Edgar Allan Poe. With a nod to Frankenstein and Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, she follows this poor man as he desperately tries to quell his demons or at least keep them secret. Seeing the scars all over him, his wife wants to believe he's just careless, but his competitors at work are eager to discredit him as a freak. As William's family and professional responsibilities grow, his anxiety about being discovered swells, sending him back underground for more savage cuts in "the one place where the world was steady."

After a particularly severe episode, he awakens to discover that a man he fought with at work has been found brutally stabbed in the sewer. As Clark has devilishly constructed it, the evidence against William couldn't be more damning. Murderous fantasies in his diary don't look good. At this crisis point, William's feverish story merges with the tale of a sewer scavenger named Long Arm Tom and his rat-catching dog. Regularly violating the laws of Parliament and nature to search the sewers, Tom may hold the clue to William's salvation, but he has no reason to give it up, and William's not convinced he deserves salvation anyhow.

Well-researched novels about giant civil-engineering projects have become something of a specialized genre lately -- and they're surprisingly entertaining, even if you're not excited by stress factors and flow rates. Two years ago, John Griesmer's *Signal and Noise* traced the laying of the first transatlantic cable along with the age's fascination with spiritualism. And last year, in *Waterborne*, Bruce Murkoff constructed a moving story around the Hoover Dam. How nice to see a woman join the men so successfully with her own engineering novel. (Attention Lawrence Summers!)

With its intense olfactory workout, *The Great Stink* won't be to everyone's taste, but it's a rich work of history and a gripping exploration of the unmentionable currents that run beneath the surface of our lives -- and it reeks of talent. ·

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/...>

Susan (aka Just My Op) says

A soldier who is mentally as well as physically damaged in the Crimean war goes home to London to work as an engineer on the sewer system, and finds comfort in being in the sewers and in cutting himself. Lots of dog fighting (against rats captured in the sewers), bribery, cruelty, a murder. The descriptions of the "better" lunatic asylum were chilling. It was hard to connect to the characters (except for the dog, Lady), and I read it quickly rather than savoring it, just to be done with it. However, by the end, I was caught up in the story. Not as good as Clark's *The Nature of Monsters*.

Barb says

I really enjoyed this dirty, grimy, gritty novel set in London in 1855. Clare Clark takes her time familiarizing the reader with the polluted and overpopulated city and its filthy and inadequate sewer system. She creates interesting characters set in a vivid and richly textured setting and takes her time laying this dark and sometimes disturbing ground work before creating the tension of conflict for her characters. She describes the many horrid smells of London in graphic detail and reveals the characters to us with story upon story, often transitioning from past to present with surprising ease.

I really loved Clare Clark's writing. The following passage is about the main character William May and how he thinks about the sewers;

'To his mind the odour was infinitely more tolerable down in the cold purity of the darkness than it was in the streets above him. In the sewers the smell was simple and direct. In the streets the stink of excrement was but one enemy in an ambush of torments. It knitted itself into the stench of fog and bodies and factories and refuse and the choked tangle of traffic and the never-ending racket and clatter to throttle the senses and make a man mad. In the sewers there was filth and the unpredictable anxieties of tide and the weather but within that there prevailed a kind of order. In the sewers a man might feel himself measured by heights and spans and gradients. A man who had never ventured down into the bowels of the capital, be he a man of London all his life, could surely not imagine such a place. For the man who was there, alone in the darkness, it was London that was impossible to imagine.'

William May is a veteran of the Crimean War and suffers from post traumatic stress, his mental health plays an important roll in this story. He is employed as a surveyor to the Commission of Sewers under Joseph Bazalgette, the chief engineer responsible for reconstructing London's sewers. William is charged with murder and it looks certain that he'll hang for the crime.

Long Arm Tom is a lonely old man who finds comfort in the company of an ugly dog. He makes his living collecting rats from the sewers and selling them to tavern owners like Frank Brassey who runs a rat pit for the Fancy in his parlor. William and Tom spend a fair amount of time in the sewers and eventually their paths cross.

I really enjoyed these characters, especially Long Arm Tom and his relationship with Lady, the dog. I thought the details were wonderful, the intrigue or mystery part of the story was well done and I liked the resolution of the story. All in all I was very pleased with this book and I'm looking forward to reading more from Clare Clark.

If you like reading about the plague I think you will like this book. If you are squeamish and can't stand the thought of reading about rats in sewers with floating human refuse clinging to the walls you might want to try something else.

Amy says

I really liked Nature of Monsters and the reviews say this one is better...I do not agree with the reviews! The imagery in this book was incredibly vivid. That being said...I felt like I was going to catch some disgusting disease just by reading this! I normally like this kind of fiction--historically rich from a non-traditional viewpoint, but this was just one appalling disgusting scene after another.

In a brief summation: A psychologically damaged soldier returns from the war to acquire a position with the London Board of Works to improve the quality of London's infamously deplorable sewer system. He finds comfort in the dark tunnels and in cutting himself there. Yes cutting himself among the rats and sewage of London! I kept expecting him to die from infection...nope! Instead he is framed for the murder of one of hundreds corpses found within the sewer system. A side story that does not intersect with the former until the very last pages includes a "tosher" who collects rats and sells them for a profit to proprietors who use them to...fight with dogs! "Gentlemen" place wagers on these bouts. Those scenes are bloody and almost more than I could take. It was almost like a personal challenge for the author to see just how disgusting she could be. I think the book could have been half the current length, but we were barraged again and again with bloody rats, foul stenches, feces loving fungi and puss filled cuts.

I, personally got "the picture" early on and couldn't wait to be finished with this book. This is not to say it wasn't a good book- I was obviously disturbed as the author intended- but I did not enjoy it and couldn't wait

to be finished.

Carol says

William May, surveyor, returns from the brutal Crimean War in 1855 to take up a post working for Bazalgette who designed the system of sewers for London following the Great Stink of 1858. The Thames was then, nothing more than an open sewer bubbling in the oppressive heat. Secondary to the interminable, almost obsessive descriptions of every conceivable variety of excrement and its smells and textures, this novel is actually a murder mystery set in the filthy and morally corrupt underworld of Victorian London. Clark's first novel, and it shows.

Sarah Rogers says

VERY descriptive of sewers. But worth it in the end. Do not try to read this book on a lunch break, unless you are on a diet.

Tony Almeida says

Não consigo ver este livro como um romance histórico mas antes como um simples livro sobre um caso de assassinato e consequente procura de libertar uma pessoa que inocentemente foi acusada, sendo salva por um golpe de sorte que o advogado, inexperiente e a tratar do seu primeiro caso, teve. Familiar? Sim, uma receita requeitada já vista em alguns filmes de Hollywood que, neste romance, por acaso se dá na Londres Vitoriana, na altura do então denominado "great stink" ou "grande fedor", quando a capital britânica se viu a braços com um grave problema de esgotos urbanos.

Colocar um cliché policial num ambiente histórico não transforma este romance num romance histórico, razão pela qual não dou mais do que duas estrelas em cinco.

A agravar, o autor dá uma "grande volta" para contar uma história de poucas páginas. A preocupação em descrever uma Londres poluída e mal-cheirosa foi levada demasiada ao extremo, sendo de leitura monótona em algumas partes, para, de repente, tudo se resolver nas últimas 40-50 páginas.

Junto ainda como nota extra, uma tradução que me pareceu aqui e ali bastante deficiente.

Decididamente não é um livro que recomende.

Max says

This was a most unusual book. A murder mystery set in Victorian England does not invoke anything out of the ordinary but... this story revolves around the woefully inadequate sewage system and an engineer who was chosen to assist in the design to modernize it. The main character, William May, is a truly disturbed man whose effort to tame his demons, within the literal bowels of the great city, fails him on every level. Clark is almost Dickensian in that she is verbose and descriptive almost to a fault. That said, if you are

squeamish regarding the final aspects of peristalsis, I suggest you pass on this read. If, however, your olfactory imagination can be contained, it is a great psychological mystery.

Sarah says

I was excited to read this. Until I read the first page.

Julia H. says

This is a VERY difficult book to read (it literally made me sick to my stomach) and I probably wouldn't have finished it if a friend hadn't enthusiastically recommended it to me.

It takes place in London, and most of the story takes place in Victorian sewers where engineers are trying to figure out how to flush out the sewage into the Thames to control disease and of course, the smell.

What makes the story so difficult to read is that the main character is a war veteran who is still haunted/traumatized by the atrocities he saw and experienced during the Crimean War. The author conveys his pain very well, and it's enough to know that he tries to escape his pain by working in the sewers -- I won't spoil the story by going into any more detail -- but he's accused of murder and the story is in part about trying to uncover who and why someone would murder the man found down in the sewer near him, and in part about the efforts to modernize the sewers.

Terence says

Like her other novel, *The Nature of Monsters*, Clare Clark accomplishes two things with *The Great Stink*. One, is a powerful (and queasily wonderful) evocation of the sights, sounds and smells of a by-gone London. In this case, the city of the Victorian Age c. 1860. The greatest city in the world is drowning in its own filth, and Parliament has reluctantly begun funding an enormous public works project that will modernize the capital's sewers. Say what you like about Clark's other qualities as a writer but even her harshest critics must admit to a marvelous facility for describing urban life that is vivid and economical - using just the correct amount of adjective and simile to create 19th century London (at least the London that existed for most of its inhabitants - unhealthy, foul, and full of men and women brutalized almost beyond humanity by the misery of their lives).

Like St. Paul's in *Monsters*, the London sewer is a major character in the novel, dominating the lives of both protagonists.

The second thing Clark accomplishes is another engrossing tale about people growing into their humanity and becoming better for it. The novel follows two men - William May and Long Arm Tom - whose destinies don't cross until the very end of the book, and, even then, they never actually meet. William is a veteran of the Crimean War (1854-56) who returns suffering from what we would recognize as post-traumatic stress disorder. In 1860s London, a veteran doesn't even have a *dysfunctional* VA to fall back on for support - he's utterly alone and, if he exhibits any abnormal behavior, he is despised, called a coward, and could be sent to an asylum. William finds solace from his demons in the sewers and by cutting himself. He's fortunate in getting a job as one of the engineers on the great project to rebuild London's sewers. There, the orderliness

and routine help focus his mind; the dark and filth of the sewers mirrors the "dark and filth" in his mind, and the cutting releases that internal filth into the tunnels under the city. As the months pass, William eventually finds his way back to a semblance of normality. The imperative need to cut becomes less and less, and William actually hopes to lead a normal life with his wife, Polly, and newborn son, Di.

Unfortunately, just when he's reached this plateau, William becomes innocently caught up in a kickback scheme involving a Mr. Hawke, member of the board overseeing the project, and Mr. England, a maker of cheap brick who had hoped to secure a lucrative contract. The circumstances of Mr. England's subsequent murder drive William insane - he suffers a complete breakdown - and he's confined to an asylum, a fate worse than death in those days. Meanwhile, Hawke has framed him for the murder and he faces the gallows.

Long Arm Tom, our second hero, is an older man, a toshier. He lives, like too many others, on the fringes of "decent" society, descending into the sewers to scavenge for the detritus of the better off to sell or to capture the rats sold to enterprising touts for use in the dog fights recently declared unlawful. Though illegal, Victorian "gentlemen" and the uncouth laborers of the city alike relish the spectacle of dogs competing with each other to kill as many rats in a certain time as possible. It's at one of these bouts that Tom runs into Lady - a mangy, disagreeable looking mutt who rests her head on his foot before being dragged off by her abusive master. Later that night, Tom discovers her following him home, her rope leash frayed and broken. Compelled by a need he doesn't understand, Tom lets her come home with him. Lady comes to fill the void in his life where he needs someone to love. Soon they become inseparable companions and he discovers that she's a natural ratter - a veritable rat-killing machine. This "talent" leads Tom to enter her into the dog fights, where she captures the attention of the Captain, who is actually the Mr. Hawke who bedevils William's life. Hawke/Captain offers Tom a substantial sum for Lady, enough for him to live relatively well for the rest of his life, and he accepts, though he suffers inexplicable fear and anxiety at the prospect of losing her. The Captain, however, cheats Tom on the deal. Tom vows to get Lady back whatever the cost. Now, the Captain had hired Tom to help hide a murdered man in the sewers. This man, Mr. England, had carried papers that Tom takes and hides, the paranoia and suspicion natural to his life telling him he needed some insurance in case the Captain tried to "shop him to the peelers" (the police).

Here is where the lives of William and Tom collide when, in the course of defending him, William's lawyer encounters Tom and learns of the potentially damning evidence. To go further would spoil the novel even more than I may have already done, so anyone at all interested in the story should pick up the book.

As with *Monsters*, Clark's tale plots the development of a person's humanity. In the case of William, a person who's lost his and must find a way to regain it or go mad. In the case of Tom, a person who knows there's a void in his life but doesn't know what it is or how to fill it.

I really, really like Clare Clark and look forward to her next novel. While I won't begrudge her the right to stay within London's city limits, it would be interesting to see if she can widen her horizons and write as compellingly in a different setting.

Hannah says

This book is shitty. No, honestly, it's shitty. Any book titled "The Great Stink" better deliver, and this one does in the shittiest possible way.

In 1855, William May returns from the Crimean War - shell shocked and without hope. He soon begins a job as an engineer with the city of London as a team of them begins the process of transforming the underground sewers from a fetid cesspool of death and disease into a modern, industrial-age architectural triumph of

sanitary efficiency. May begins to find salvation in the dank and eerie sewers as his war-torn demons are slowly being laid to rest. Unfortunately, a murder brings all the demons back with a vengeance as May fights not only for his sanity, but his very life.

Clark crafts a very pungent story; weaving factual people and events with the fictional plotline to create a very compelling story. Not for the squeamish or those with a weak stomach. Certainly not readable during snack time or meal time. Clark isn't shy about showing you the slimy, putrid underbelly of Victorian London's sewer system. If nothing else, this book will make you appreciate the comforts of life you take for granted every time you flush the toilet. I know it did for me.

Jim Loter says

I just read a gaggle of other reviews on here and I've concluded that it is impossible to summarize The Great Stink without making some kind of pun about malodorousness or shit. Nevertheless, I will try.

The novel lingers on the putrid conditions both above and below the streets of Victorian London. The text practically drips with toxic sludge and noisome fog. Indeed, the city's sewers - in particular, their ineffectiveness - are the primary setting of the story and container of its many plot points. Two parallel plot lines emerge from the fetid reek of the sewage troughs, collide in insanity and violence, and then become entangled as the actual plot kicks in about 2/3 of the way through.

The slow start to the plot is not necessarily a criticism, though I did find the first half a bit slow-going. But Clare Clark does a rather remarkable job describing the city in all its disgusting glory and she crafts fully realized characters who are right at home in the filthy and foul streets, taverns, and catacombs. William May - the sewer engineer with horrific wartime flashbacks and a propensity toward cutting (himself) - is a principled but pathetic man who is too good for the world in which he finds himself. Long Arm Tom, the rat-catcher, is a product of the very miasma that chokes the city - wretched, poor, and desperate. Both men are taken advantage of by cruel characters and must rely on an unlikely savior.

The city of London is as much a protagonist as William and Tom, however. It is a city growing out of control with shamefully inadequate infrastructure - both physical and social - to support the basic functions and needs of its citizenry. In the end, the novel is really about the struggle of civilization to tame the basest and most corrupt elements of human nature - our literal and figurative excrement ... both the shit and the shits.

Dammit; I said I wasn't going to do that...

Simon says

The Great Stink by Clare Clark (www.Penguin.com)

This book is not for anyone who is at all squeamish about sewers and what goes on in sewers or anyone who has olfactory Synaesthesia that means they can smell something from its description.

I'll also be grateful that this book isn't a scratch and sniff version as The Great Stink of the title is the period of London history in the 19th century that led to our current sewer system being built by Bazalgette which is a major part of this fantastic story about William May who is a Surveyor who is involved in the works but is also suffering from PTSD from his time in the Crimean war, his symptoms manifest themselves in hallucinations and episodes of self-harm that are truly stomach churning.

Most of the book is spent in the sewers with William among the toshers and flushers mapping the sewers and working out what needs to be done while having flashbacks and harming himself and we also follow one of the toshers Long arm Tom who is seeking his fortune or at least enough to live on down in the sewers searching for old tosh to sell.

Even when they get above ground this book ends up in the sort of pub that has a “Fancy” where Gents can go and bet on how many rats a dog can kill in a minute or in the dark corners of the Rookery of St Giles. In amongst all this much and mire a murder takes place and all the strands of the story are masterfully pulled together while I finally find out why the suburb of Hell was renamed Padding town or Paddington and why using Padders as slang for the station is just being descriptive of the work that used to go on there when it was London’s outfall sewer and the Padders padded the sewage into bricks to sell as fertiliser to farmers. The book is both a great dark history lesson and a brilliant murder mystery with all sorts of other elements thrown in and is a great Steam Punk novel at the same time. It is hard to believe that it’s a debut novel and I hope to be reading more books by Clare Clark soon.
