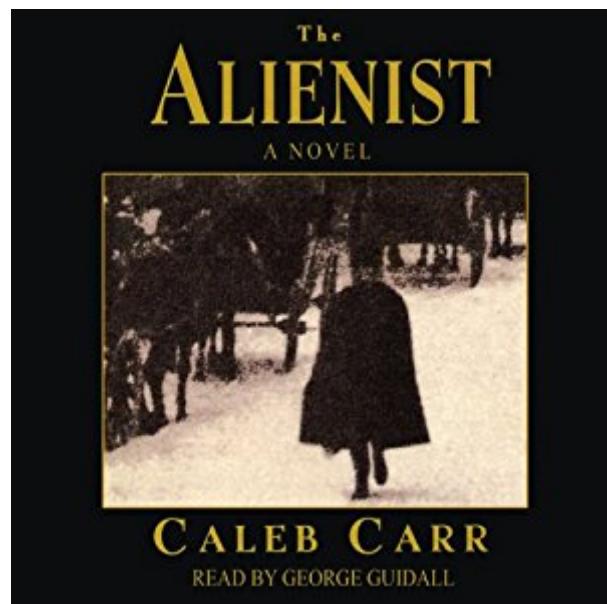


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The Alienist



Synopsis

The year is 1896, the place, New York City. On a cold March night New York Times reporter John Schuyler Moore is summoned to the East River by his friend and former Harvard classmate Dr. Laszlo Kreizler, a psychologist, or "alienist." On the unfinished Williamsburg Bridge, they view the horribly mutilated body of an adolescent boy, a prostitute from one of Manhattan's infamous brothels. The newly appointed police commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt, in a highly unorthodox move, enlists the two men in the murder investigation, counting on the reserved Kreizler's intellect and Moore's knowledge of New York's vast criminal underworld. They are joined by Sara Howard, a brave and determined woman who works as a secretary in the police department. Laboring in secret (for alienists, and the emerging discipline of psychology, are viewed by the public with skepticism at best), the unlikely team embarks on what is a revolutionary effort in criminology-- amassing a psychological profile of the man they're looking for based on the details of his crimes. Their dangerous quest takes them into the tortured past and twisted mind of a murderer who has killed before, and will kill again before the hunt is over. Fast-paced and gripping, infused with a historian's exactitude, *The Alienist* conjures up the Gilded Age and its untarnished underside: verminous tenements and opulent mansions, corrupt cops and flamboyant gangsters, shining opera houses and seamy gin mills. Here is a New York during an age when questioning society's belief that all killers are born, not made, could have unexpected and mortal consequences.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

New York City, 1896. A serial killer is on the loose, gruesomely preying upon cross-dressing boy prostitutes. Police detectives are making no progress solving the ghastly crimes. In fact, someone with power or influence seems to be bent on silencing witnesses and thwarting any investigation. Reform-minded police commissioner Theodore Roosevelt (yes, the same TR who later became president), determined to catch the killer, assembles an unconventional group of investigators headed by "alienist" Dr. Lazlo Kreizler. (In the 19th century, when psychology was in its infancy, the mentally ill were considered "alienated" from themselves and society, and the experts who treated them were known as "alienists.") Dr. Kreizler's team includes his former Harvard classmate, New York Times crime reporter John Moore; Moore's longtime friend, spitfire heiress-turned-NYPD-secretary Sara Hamilton; and two former mental patients who now work as his servants. To help identify the killer--who leaves behind very few clues, manages to spirit his victims out of locked rooms, and passes through the city unnoticed--the team attempts to develop a psychological profile of the type of person who would be capable of such horrendous deeds. The novelty of their approach does not win them any fans from the mental-health establishment or most NYPD detectives, and throughout the novel, they attempt to keep their involvement secret. Author Caleb Carr puts his historical background to fascinating use. "The Alienist" is filled with rich details about both the seamier underside and more privileged parts of late-19th-century New York City and the then-novel crime detection techniques. Detectives Lucius and Marcus Isaacson, assigned to assist the investigation, employ the not-yet-accepted science of fingerprinting and other methods of identification in their hunt for the killer. "The Alienist" is one of the few murder mysteries that I have ever enjoyed reading a second time. The characters are memorable, dryly amusing at times, and always fascinating. Carr portrays his victims as humans and individuals, rather than sensationalizing their professions. The plot, including a race against time once the team predicts when the killer is likely to strike again, moves along at a brisk pace. The historical detail advances the plot rather than bogging it down. Lovers of historical fiction and detective mysteries will find a treat in "The Alienist."

The Alienist is a book that is filled with both mystery and horror and it is absolutely riveting. Although a little over five hundred pages long, The Alienist is so fantastic and reads so well that we barely notice the pages going by. I read it in two evenings, something that is very rare for me; when a book is as good as this one is, I like to savor it and make it last. The first thing that most readers will wonder about is the somewhat strange title. What, exactly, is an alienist? Well, as Carr explains, prior to the twentieth century, those who were mentally ill were thought to be alienated, from society and from their own true nature as well. Those who studied the pathology of mental illness were thus

known as "alienists." The plot centers around three friends: a journalist, John Moore; an alienist, Lazlo Kreizler; and a newly-appointed Police Commissioner who just happens to be Teddy Roosevelt. The three are working to solve a series of brutal murders that involves a string of boy prostitutes. Teddy, as would be expected, is on top of everything and appoints Dr. Kreizler to head the investigation into the murders. Moore is included by association only, it would seem, since he and Teddy went to Yale together. Coincidentally, Moore has only recently returned from England where he was busy covering the Jack the Ripper murders. Kreizler immediately begins to track the murders using what is known and what is unknown and via assumption as well. The twists and turns in this book are so complex and varied that both information and assumptions change almost as quickly as the team of investigators can piece them all together. As would be expected, tracking a serial killer in New York City isn't an easy job. People die, disappear and are murdered with frightening regularity and, usually, with little rhyme or reason. Roosevelt, however, is determined. Not only must he solve the murders, he must also clean up the NYPD in the process. There are, of course, the usual assortment of people who simply do not want the murders solved, in this case, corrupt policeman, underworld bosses and even the city's elite. Virtually everyone seems to hold the attitude that the murder victims, being prostitutes, shouldn't matter. In fact, there are those who think the city should be glad to rid of them. This is a book filled with both social and political turmoil, turmoil that threatens to overwhelm the murder case and make it impossible to solve. The writing is fluid and really first-rate. The pages fly by and the suspense builds like a danse macabre. The characters are fully-developed but a little dark. The only bright spot in this fascinating but bizarre book is Teddy Roosevelt, himself. But it would, of course, be impossible to paint Teddy all somber, all of the time. *The Alienist* is a dark and offbeat book and one that borders on the macabre, but it is also one that is fascinating and extremely well-written. All in all, an enormous accomplishment.

If you want to read a historical mystery that you can't put down, look no further than *The Alienist*! Set in New York in 1896, Caleb Carr transports the reader to the smells and sights of that period. The reader is whisked away to dine at Delmonico's, sit in box seats at the Opera, and learn about Theodore Roosevelt's efforts to reform the NYC police department. *The Alienist* focuses on Dr. Leo Kreiszler and John Schuyler Moore, who Roosevelt calls in to investigate a serial killer who is targeting boy prostitutes. The three men join to put together a top-notch and thoroughly modern investigative team (including one of the first women allowed to work at the Department) to delve into the crimes with a combination of psychological profiling and novel techniques like finger-printing and crime-scene analysis. What I found most fascinating was the insights Carr provides into the

formation of criminal science techniques that we now take for granted. Carr is a gifted writer with the ability to transport you to another time and place within pages. In addition, he knows how to write a good detective thriller. This one of the finest historical mysteries I've ever read and I highly recommend it.

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The Alienist

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