

## A Skeleton in Every House

**Isabella Duke**

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*In the entertaining historical mystery novel A Skeleton in Every House, addiction and ambition fuel crimes that strike close to a young journalist's home.*

A journalist is enmeshed in a murder case in Isabella Duke's erudite Victorian-era mystery novel *A Skeleton in Every House*.

Catriona is a reporter for the *Messenger*, where she is indulged because her father helms the paper. When she hears about a murder at the Limehouse docks near the Thames, she's eager to learn more. But Inspector Marlowe discourages her presence there, even as Lord Ashford, her father's friend and a director at Scotland Yard, makes inquiries of his own. Ashford's son, Nate, whose attraction to Catriona left them estranged, is back home under questionable circumstances too.

In this fascinating twining of intrigue and romance, Catriona's resolve to uncover the story of the victim—who was a member of the peerage—is formed alongside her memories of and brushes with Nate, whose confessions unsettle her. Her friendship with Nate's sister, Beth, helps to advance the plot; together, they discuss recent events.

Meanwhile, London's famed locales, including Piccadilly Circus, Covent Garden, and an opium den in the East End, energize the mystery's central conundrum: to find out what an esteemed lord was doing at the docks just before his death and which vices he might have been indulging. Indeed, this division between people's statuses and their darker secrets constitutes a potent theme that affects other characters. It's further deepened through occasional background information about the British empire's extension into Hong Kong and its contributions to the opium problem.

Catriona's grief concerning her mother's death is mentioned but becomes overshadowed by the mystery. Her investigative methods are realistic: she pursues leads that the victim's widow found but faces roadblocks because of her gender and class and ends up gathering insights over shared cups of tea. It's necessity, not desire, that obligates her to seek Inspector Marlowe's help after a second murder occurs. Still, their rapport is engaging, covering their initial caution and their gradual acknowledgment of their mutual desire for justice. His concern for Catriona's safety is tinged with hints of deeper personal interest, sparking subtle frisson between them. Perceptive and adaptive, though sometimes terse, the inspector is a captivating secondary lead who forms impressions of people with ease.

Few strong suspects emerge, even halfway into the book. The ultimate culprit is too predictable; their reveal induces a stereotypical confession and a convenient resolution. This lessens the mystery's urgency and feeds into some slow-burning interludes.

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KAREN RIGBY (March 10, 2023)

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