

Ravage & Son

Jerome Charyn

Bellevue Literary Press (Aug 22, 2023)

Softcover \$17.99 (288pp)

978-1-954276-19-2

Jerome Charyn's rollicking novel *Ravage & Son* tours the seedy underbelly of turn-of-the-century New York City.

Between 1883 and 1913, the city's Jewish quarter witnesses the reign and fall of Lionel Ravage, a hardware and property magnate. Though his mistresses and unacknowledged children are legion, his only love is Manya, the daughter of a Lithuanian scholarly tenant. Their illegitimate son, Ben, grows up to be a detective and protégé of *Jewish Daily Forward* journalist Abraham Cahan. Both men resolve to expose the city's corruption and criminality; meanwhile, Ben takes on a missing persons case.

With clear images of immigrants' tenement living, this is a true "panorama of human flesh." There are prostitutes, criminals, opium addicts, peddlers, and scavengers. Among the memorable characters are gang leader Monk Eastman and Clara Karp, a Ukrainian refugee actress who performs as Hamlet with lines in Yiddish and English. There are also cameos by Henry James—in a standout chapter, "The Master," Cahan accompanies the novelist on a trip to Ellis Island—and atmospheric mentions of cultural landmarks like the Ziegfeld Follies and Woolworth's stores.

The realistic presentation of racism at the time extends as far as the language: "fagin" and "shylock" are employed as generic terms for pickpockets and moneylenders. However, the addition of a lesbian couple is a progressive choice. Outmoded vocabulary ("The Shilly-Shally Saloon," "vagabondage," "jackanapes") enhances the authenticity of the time period. And although "Ravage" is a key surname, it appears in clever metaphorical usage as well, in reference to sexual despoiling and suggesting an overall threat of ruin. In contrast to the often squalid details of ghetto life is the tenderness of Lionel's recurring grief for Chlöe, his murdered cat.

An entertaining historical romp, *Ravage & Son* brings New York City's criminal underground to vibrant life.

REBECCA FOSTER (September / October 2023)

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