

The Anarchists' Club: Leo Stanhope #2

Alex Reeve

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In *The Anarchists' Club*, Alex Reeve brings back his large-hearted Victorian sleuth, Leo Stanhope, a transgender man who's swept into a lousy London murder case.

When a stranger's body is found at the Social and Democratic club—which was planning an arson against Sir Reginald Thackery's jute mill—Leo is a suspect. Thackery's son forces Leo to provide him with an alibi by threatening to expose that Leo was assigned female at birth. Leo has little choice: if he were to be outed, he'd face charges of fraud and cruel hospital therapies.

The victim's children, Aiden and Ciara, stir Leo's protective instincts. Prompted by Ciara's memories of witnessing the crime, he embarks on a perilous trek that spans the elaborate London Zoo, a music hall, and beyond. The stress of being discovered as transgender—which Leo considers duplicitous—compounds with thoughts of his estranged family and kidnapping threats against the children. This gripping amalgam unfolds through agile plot turns, setting Leo's vulnerable suppression against his need to let others in, including Rosie, a forthright widow who helps him crack the case.

Amid Leo's self-conscious pain and penchant for impulsive bravery, there's room for series-length growth. The book's LGBTQ+ themes are a poignant, empathetic retrospective on keeping silent and everyday risks, with tactile reminders that Leo can't make a single misstep. Thackery's family secrets smolder into savage discontent, and the climax is a theatrical conflagration of class struggle at the mill with a murderer's misplaced, Darwinian views about who gets to live. Despite the violence, it's tough to assign blame in the end.

The Anarchists' Club culls dark Victoriana and the warped effects of love in its story that features classic red herrings, chases, and Leo's unflinching sense of justice, all adding up to an intricate, satisfying mystery.

KAREN RIGBY (May / June 2020)

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