

The Caltrap Murders: A Bradley Davison Mystery

Howard Bruce Weiner

ReadersMagnet

(353pp)

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A surprising serial killer goes up against an atypical detective in the thrilling novel The Caltrap Murders.

A serial killer uses a medieval method to terrorize New York City in Howard Bruce Weiner's mystery novel *The Caltrap Murders*.

Professor Bradley Davison teaches European history at Queens College. He also has specialized expertise in medieval scholarship and has a successful historical novel to his name; the latter buoys him financially. Still, many of his days are mundane—spent grading papers, doing endless research, and consuming too much sugar. But this ordinary existence is upended when a serial killer with a penchant for medieval culture begins stalking the city, leaving Davison in a unique position—perhaps able to stop the murders.

The killer has an interesting modus operandi: he uses caltraps (spined weapons used to disable horses and chariots during battles in medieval times) to corner his victims before he strikes. Fortuitously, Davison knows enough about the weapons to position himself as a detective for the case. Still, his perspective as a historian dominates, even in the book's procedural sections, where the clues require his specialized understanding in order to fit together. Often, his insights seem too convenient; still, they push the novel forward—if toward an underwhelming final revelation.

The book is heavy on exposition—most so in its beginning, where considerable time is spent introducing the characters. Later, detail-heavy scenes show the killer planning and undertaking his kills. Meanwhile, people's conversations prove stifling; many are filled with unnecessary information. And the novel's progression is somewhat predictable, moving at a steady beat that mimics the pace of a seasoned police detective who's trying to catch a killer—even though its hero is not a proper fit in that role.

In the end, Davison is more appealing on his own merits than he is convincing as an investigator. Indeed, his background is established in a manner that sends up academia and its trappings well; he muddles through the frustrations of being an assistant professor on a daily basis. Beyond the murders, his relationship with Libby is made focal—though she is not equally well fleshed out. Her looks are overdescribed and exoticized, and her position as Davison's graduate assistant has troubling implications. Further, she is not the only supporting character whose development rests on stereotypes.

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CHLOE CLARK (December 14, 2023)

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