

The Circus of Satan

Jeffrey Konvitz

89th Street Press

(542pp)

978-1-66295-035-3

In the epic historical novel The Circus of Satan, a vengeance plot unfolds against a tangle of criminal powers.

In Jeffrey Konvitz's epic historical novel *The Circus of Satan*, an Irish gambler takes on criminal corruption in New York.

In 1878, an aspiring bare-knuckle brawler, the Hesse Kid, beats a low-ranking member of the gang that controls Manhattan's criminal underworld. A drunken mob captures and murders the Hesse Kid, transforming him into a legendary figure. At the turn of the century, Manhattan falls under the rule of criminal organizations that control its police and politicians. A haunted boxer, McGuinness, arrives in New York with a broken arm, on a quest to avenge a murdered family. He is set to make use of his criminal contacts to do so, and he hopes to tear the system down in the process.

In this sweeping epic that spans almost a century, nineteenth-century crime and political corruption are covered at length. Throughout, the prose is grounded by historical context. There are frequent references to popular culture, as with the description "Big Tim Sullivan, an elongated version of W. C. Fields." And people's voices reveal their class disparities and their efforts to blend in: When one is speaking to politicians, "a female [is called] a girl"; in the rougher parts of town, people say "goil."

McGuinness's connection to the legend of the Hesse Kid is revealed slowly across time, as his quest takes him through Manhattan's hellish underworld. He becomes aware of horrific sex crimes, the purposeful assassinations of people's rivals, and brawls between opposing mafia groups. However, the pace flags as he sets up his master plan, which evinces his intense patience but also requires intense patience to follow. Indeed, most of his efforts take years to pay off. Further, the groups he goes against are a wide tangle; each politician and criminal is connected to a cabal of underlings, many of whom are called by nicknames, making them complicated to track.

Introduced as a brute who revels in chaotic violence, McGuinness is an antihero with hidden depths. His mental states are revealed in bursts, with his voice adopting a staccato rhythm when he's at his most unhinged; he is most often more methodical, though. His work toward revenge reveals how trauma corrupted him. The most rewarding aspect of his story comes not through the ultimate success of his plans, but after his revenge is sated, with the novel covering how he lives out his remaining days as society evolves.

Chronicling the breakdown of criminal power and the corrupt nature of politics, the dark historical novel *The Circus of Satan* follows a man's quest for revenge.

JOHN M. MURRAY (February 26, 2025)

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