

The Lamplighter

Crystal J. Bell

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A girl in a whaling village investigates several disappearances in Crystal J. Bell's mesmerizing historical novel *The Lamplighter*.

Even as self-reliant eighteen-year-old Temperance mourns her father, who was hanged, she takes up his mantle as Warbler Seaport's lamplighter—a vital job that helps to shepherd others home through the dense fog that otherwise claims lives. She faces skepticism about her fitness for the role and feels tense because of her unstable circumstances. Still, she feels compelled to protect her family, even at the expense of her dreams; she bears burdens beyond the usual requirements of her age.

Lamplighting work isn't easy: Temperance endures sexual harassment, two lamps go out on her watch, and a fellow teenager goes missing. She fears losing her job and wonders whether she could have spoken up to prevent the teenager's disappearance. Further, a ship carver, Gideon, proves ominous and smooth-talking; Temperance is warned to avoid him. Her circumstances are tempered somewhat by the presence of her childhood sweetheart.

Still, a foreboding atmosphere pervades the novel, which combines elements of a grim fairy tale, devilish misogyny, and ecological retribution. There are hints that the fog has an otherworldly, predatory quality. Warbler Seaport itself is known for its carved figureheads, which whalers from afar seek out for good fortune. It's a crossroads town entrenched in tradition, and it teems with suspicious strangers. And there's a sense of bristling danger toward its girls, who face continual shame and whose freedoms are constrained. Indeed, Temperance is even discredited as a witness for being a girl. The truth, when it arises, is gripping, suggesting future reckonings to come.

Treachery abounds in the historical novel *The Lamplighter*, wherein crime comes to a seaport town with insidious consequences for its residents.

KAREN RIGBY (May / June 2024)

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