



It is against the grimy backdrop of turn-of-the-century New York City that the events of Caleb Carr's page-turner *The Alienist* take place. Here, on the nascent Williamsburg bridge, Dr. Laszlo Kreizler summons crime reporter and former Harvard classmate John Schuyler Moore to the scene of the last in a series of gruesome murders of boy prostitutes. There they are met by another Harvard chum, the newly appointed police commissioner Theodore Roosevelt.

Normally the murder of a prostitute wouldn't merit much attention, particularly if he is a cross-dresser who caters to the desires of a homosexual underground. But even amid New York's uncaring depravity, the mutilations are twisted enough to cause Roosevelt to begin an investigation: one par-

ticularly gruesome detail of the mutilations is that the flesh of the victim's buttocks is carved away and removed; later, a note appears from the killer himself, claiming that he has eaten the flesh he has removed from his victim's body.

How plainly familiar this sounds to the reader whose consciousness is so saturated by the likes of Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy, as well as with Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis as Mickey and Mallory Knox. But *The Alienist* is not about what the murderer does, but rather why; for Dr. Kreizler is what the nineteenth century called psychologists and psychiatrists: an alienist; the novel's title comes from the name given to those who study individuals who are alienated from society. Roosevelt has summoned Kreizler because of Kreizler's knowledge of the abnormal mind.

An investigation team is formed when Roosevelt and Moore are joined by Sarah Howard, Roosevelt's feisty secretary and the New York Police Department's first female employee. They place themselves under Kreizler's tutelage and accept the conviction that every human action has meaning within the context of individual experience. Accordingly, each corpse left by the killer can be read as a testament of his life experience, and the mutilations can be read like the words of a riddle whose answer will lead them to him.

Roosevelt appoints detectives Lucius and Marcus Isaacson to join the investigation. The Isaacson brothers are appointed for their "modern" techniques, and with those techniques, they bring to the novel some of its most interesting historical detail. (Who knew that dactyloscopy, or fingerprinting, still had not been accepted as a method of identification in 1896?)

Together, the investigators use whatever details and scraps of information they might gather about the killer to form a theoretical picture of him, or, as Kreizler puts it, "an imaginary man." As this theoretical picture gains clarity, it becomes the mug shot they use to find the killer.

The effect of following along in such a pursuit is chilling. As details about the murderer come to light, Carr creates a sense that this murderer is there, free to roam the streets of New York while the author's well-crafted main characters become more and more preoccupied with the details of the murders themselves. Carr's pace is so gradual and so flawlessly smooth that the reader is caught wholly off-guard when the investigators actually confront the murderer at the intended sight of one of his killings.

Perhaps the only quarrel a reader might have with *The Alienist* is that it does not answer the very questions it poses, for Carr's murderer remains a spectre, and just as he is on the verge of becoming real, just as Kreizler is about to confirm or correct his gathered conjectures about him, the novel disposes of him, so both Kreizler and the reader are left hanging.

Still, specific questions about the killer are transcended in a comment Dr. Kreizler gives about how such individuals can come to exist: "We revel in men like (him)-they are the easy repositories of all that is dark in our very social world. But the things that helped make (him) what he was? Those, we tolerate. Those, we even enjoy..." Could a statement be more timely? There is little doubt that Caleb Carr wants us to see the similarities between the setting he creates in *The Alienist* and our own world.

review
George Hicks