



The Magus of Hay

Phil Rickman

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When a man's body is discovered in the picturesque town of Hay-on-Wye, his death appears to be "unnatural" in every sense. Merrily Watkins, parish priest, single mother, and exorcist, is drafted in to investigate, in this 12th installment

A man's body is found below a waterfall. It looks like suicide or an accidental drowning—until DI Frannie Bliss enters the dead man's home. What he finds there sends him to Merrily Watkins, the Diocese of Hereford's official advisor on the paranormal. It's been nearly 40 years since Hay was declared an independent state by its self-styled king—a development seen at the time as a joke, a publicity scam. But behind this pastiche a dark design was taking shape, creating a hidden history of murder and ritual-magic, the relics of which are only now becoming horribly visible. It's a situation that will take Merrily Watkins—alone for the first time in years—to the edge of madness.

The Magus of Hay Details

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Author : Phil Rickman

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From Reader Review The Magus of Hay for online ebook

Damaskcat says

A new Merrily Watkins mystery is always something I look forward to reading and this one does not disappoint. Merrily is on her own as daughter Jane has gone on an archaeological dig. She had already booked a week's holiday which now seems a little irrelevant without Jane but she is soon occupied with matters closely connected to her job as Deliverance Consultant to the Diocese of Hereford.

A retired teacher keeps seeing her friend who has recently died; detective Frannie Bliss – newly returned to work after partly recovering from horrendous injuries sustained in the course of his duties, needs her advice and Robin and Betty need her help in clearing the atmosphere in the bookshop they are opening in Hay on Wye.

Readers who follow this series will remember Robin and Betty from 'Crown of Lights'. But things are due to become very much more complicated than at first appears and there will be many supernatural events and plenty of evil acts from live human beings before the tangled web is smoothed out.

As ever this is a well written and disturbing novel mixing the supernatural with earthly crimes. The characters are well drawn and believable and flawed human beings struggle to come to terms with their own and other people's problems.

In my opinion this is probably one of the best books in this excellent series and I raced through it – wanting to know what happened but at the same time not wanting the book to end. It could be read as a standalone novel but is best read – in my opinion – as part of the series.

Greg Reynolds says

Neo nazis, ghosts and satanists. What's not to like in a mystery novel?

Lesley Arrowsmith says

Oh, this was fun!

I live in Hay, and I have lived in Cusop Dingle, where part of the action takes place. In fact, the first victim in the book is drowned in my favourite waterfall!

And Phil Rickman gets Hay. He understands what makes the booksellers tick.

For those unfamiliar with Hay-on-Wye, it has been a town full of second-hand bookshops for fifty years, and second hand booksellers are a peculiar breed. The pagan couple are typical of newcomers to the trade, hoping to get their stock from charity shops while selling their own private collection, but Phil Rickman also comments on how the trade is changing because of the internet and Kindles.

He said himself that he had to tone down the eccentricity of the town to make it more believable (even the neo-Nazis have a factual past in the area!). And of all the eccentrics in town, there are none more so than Richard Booth, the King of Hay, who has a minor, but important, part in the story (and about one line, which

is "Bugger off!").

For the purposes of the book, he invents a few new bookshops and a bar, including an Indian character who is quite fun - it's pretty hard to include ethnic minorities in Herefordshire, because there just aren't very many of them, but Jeeter makes sense within the neo-Nazi storyline.

I'm a great fan of Jane (Merrily's daughter) and Lol (Merrily's boyfriend) as well - who hardly appear in this book, though Frannie Bliss the policeman has a large part.

The story also goes up to Capel-y-ffin, home of a medieval priory, a Victorian Anglo-Catholic community run by Father Ignatius (with bonus vision of the Virgin Mary) and Eric Gill the artist and head of a dysfunctional family. It's up in the Black Mountains not far from Hay, and is part of the Vicar of Hay's group of parishes. Father Richard himself gets a mention, though he doesn't meet Merrily (he doesn't approve of women priests, though a man who has a standard poodle called Jimmy the Curate, and welcomes all dogs to his services, can't be all bad. He's even blessed my dog in the street, which she accepted quite happily, though she herself was a Buddhist (long story).

I saw Phil Rickman talk about the book at Hay Castle (which is also mentioned in the book) during the Hay Winter Festival, and he was fascinating and enjoyable as always. I always try to go and see him when he's giving a talk.

Kerry Hennigan says

Phil Rickman's latest Merrily Watkins novel is a welcome return to top form for the celebrated mystery writer. His previous title in the series, *The Secrets of Pain*, was one of the more difficult of the Watkins stories to follow, and seemed to lack the kind of esoteric spark that I enjoy in his books.

Not so with *The Magus of Hay*, in which the body of a very elderly man is found in the Wye River of Hay, setting off a chain of events that reveals a dark and disturbing undercurrent to the town famous for its second-hand book shops.

Merrily's friend DI Francis Bliss is recovering from injuries sustained in their last joint adventure when the body is found in the river. With the help of a retired former colleague resident in Hay, he attempts to find out whom, if anyone, is responsible for the death of the old man.

His investigation brings him in to contact with some of the colourful and eccentric individuals of Hay, and the newcomers who have taken over an old bookshop in the hope of earning a living selling titles about pagan religion, of which they are adherents.

But the shop has a less than happy history, as quickly becomes evident.

Merrily meantime is coping with the demands of her parishioners as well as with the absence of her boyfriend Lol and her daughter Jane. The novel is the poorer for both being away temporarily pursuing their own careers, leaving Merrily alone with just Ethel the cat for company. And even Ethel gets short shift in this outing.

But, *The Magus of Hay* certainly grabbed and held my attention for the short period of time it took me to read the book – a welcome interruption to less enthralling reading matter.

Review by Kerry Hennigan
November 20, 2013.

Chris says

It was somewhat ironic reading this on a kindle considering. I do prefer real books to ebooks. It's an okay story and mystery. A bit Midsome Murders too.

Caroline says

After a two year absence Merrily Watkins is back, and boy does she have a story to tell. For the first time in many years she finds herself alone. Her daughter Jane is away on an archaeology dig, and her boyfriend Lol is on tour. Merrily is supposed to be on a much needed and long overdue holiday. Then she gets a phone-call from that loveable Scouser, Frannie Bliss.

I didn't miss Jane or Lol, as their absence allowed the welcome return of Robin and Betty Thorogood and Gwynn Arthur Jones.

"The Magus of Hay" is easily the best in the Merrily Watkins series. It has replaced "The Cure of Souls" as my personal favorite. Anyone who has read the series will love this book. If you have never read anything by Phil Rickman my advice is get reading. You don't know what you're missing.

Lc says

One of the best books in the series, and worth reading! Fans of this series should be happy with this book, even though we are missing some old friends: both Jane and Lol are away, and even Gomer Parry Plant Hire only makes a small appearance. But don't worry--we have Frannie Bliss, still recovering from his injuries in the previous book, to help Merrily, and some other characters from a book further back in the series (and from another Phil Rickman book) show up too.

As always, the writing is strong, and the characters are well developed--it's like catching up with old friends every time I read a book in the series. But the mystery aspect is strong is always, and the backstory--the history of the book selling town of Hay, and some of the darker aspects of ceremonial magic--is also quite well done.

Lovers of this series will find this a strong book, and people who haven't read the series should begin the series, but probably this is not the best book to begin with, as it does help to have an understanding of relationships and characters.

For those looking for intelligent, character driven mysteries with a touch of the supernatural, you can't do better than this series. The books are far better written than the Elizabeth George series, but they share similarities in that they are character driven and complex. And these are in no way "paranormal" books--rather they draw on the mystery of everyday life and Merrily's job (she is a "deliverance consultant," i.e. exorcist), and also tie into the nature of people's beliefs and practices. The supernatural elements are always intelligently integrated and not unbelievable.

David Harris says

It's good to see Rickman's Merrily Watkins return, this time in a mystery that centres on the second hand book capital of the UK, Hay-on-Wye. (The self-referentiality of a supernatural mystery, about books and Hay, written by an author and broadcaster with links to Hay, only adds to the thrill - it's genuinely difficult to be sure what is real and what is made up here, adding to the atmosphere and the plausibility).

In this book, Merrily is supposedly on holiday. Jane is away on a dig. Lol is off on tour. Even Gomer Parry only makes brief appearances. The Revd Watkins is pretty much alone, when Frannie Bliss calls to ask her advice about a suspicious drowning.

At the same time, Robin and Betty Thoroughgood (who you may remember from A Crown of Lights) are trying to make a new start, setting up an esoteric bookshop in Hay. The shop they choose has a... peculiar... atmosphere, leading them to begin enquiries about its history and previous owners. That atmosphere, and what they discover, seems at odds with the general bookishness of Hay. Could there be a struggle going on for the future of the town - and if so, how does that link to the death Frannie is looking into - of a man regarded locally as a wizard?

The story just tumbles out, eventually involving disappearances, deaths, a visit to Hay by a hippy convoy in the 80s, crazed far right cultists, and a crowd of old friends who have appeared in previous Watkins mysteries. There are many threads in the plot, and a good tip would be to keep careful track of the names, if you want to spot the villain in time. It's great entertainment and time spent with Ms Watkins is never wasted. However I didn't feel it was the very best of the Merrily stories. The absence of Jane and Lol leaves a gap, as does the fact that much of the story - and really all the plot - takes place away from Ledwardine, and doesn't involve Merrily directly (true, a subplot does).

Over the course of the now 12 books, I've built up a sense that there are still mysteries in Ledwardine and I want to see Merrily solving them, assisted (or hampered!) by the usual gang, while trying to keep her parish going. (Full disclosure: my wife is a vicar in the Church of England, so I may be a bit of a nerd on some of this - though not the deliverance stuff!) I think this is really Frannie's book, and while he's a great character, I want more Merrily.

So four, not five, stars - but it's still a great read - especially the relentless conclusion.

Carol says

This being the 12th instalment of the Merrily Watkins series, I was a bit reluctant to read this. I had pre ordered it and was pleasantly surprised when it dropped thru my letterbox, but I put it on the shelf for 'later' and actively avoided picking it up when it came time for a new book. Why? Because - let's face it - when someone is on the 12th book in a series, surely it must be 'same old same old'.

How wrong was I? Completely!

From the first pages I was pulled into the story and held there, totally engrossed in the characters and the plights they got themselves into. Every character was well written, to the point that I wasn't sure who was fictional and who was going to be suing Mr Rickman :) How he can write characters and places that are part

fictional and part real, weaving them into a wholly believable story, is beyond me. I often found myself wondering if he was writing fact wrapped up in tale, to get away with the telling of it.

This book was started at the beginning of a 7 hour train journey from middle England to northern Scotland, and I didn't see any scenery on the trip, I was too wrapped up in the story.

I was sad not to see Lol, Jane, Irene or Gomer this time round, although they were lurking in the background, but it was nice to see Merrily take control and get the job done proving that she doesn't need 'the team' no matter how much fun they are to have around.

Looking forward to the 13th book, and this time I won't wait to read it. Highly recommended!

Sheila Crompton says

Absolutely brilliant Merrily Watkins by Phil Rickman. Once I started reading the book I found it extremely difficult to put down, I just had to carry on until I finished it. I didn't miss the absence of Jane and Lol although I hope that they will be back in the next Merrily book along with Gomer who only made a very brief appearance in Magus. Great to see Robin and Betty back as main characters.

It's been a number of years since I've not felt able to put a book down except to make numerous cups of coffee. 19 hours after downloading the book I'd finished reading it...

One thing I do love about Phil's books is that you can actually follow the action as most of them are set in real places. Google Earth and the little man was useful to view some of the locations although the camera car didn't actually take shots in the centre of Hay-on-Wye.

Manuel Antão says

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

My favourite ghost-buster is back...well, back in late 2013, but only now was I able to read it.

I read more than most people, typically from fifty to a hundred books a year, and it is unfortunate that there are enough absolutely first-class books around that I'm not going to have time to finish them all. I won't even get close. Shame on me. That's why I sometimes feel guilty to spend some time with books that at first seem to be entirely frivolous. This impression is just that. An impression, a feeling. Fortunately the Merrily Watkins series is more than meets the eye. This makes me feel less guilty...

The rest of this review can be found elsewhere.

F.G. Cottam says

I've read most of the Merrily Watkins books (though not in sequence - which remains on my list of things to do stranded on a desert island with plenty of free time and no distractions). I can't think of a living British writer who conjures atmosphere as well as Phil does from descriptions of the countryside, usually in hostile weather. Another strength is his minor characters, who have an impact far beyond the amount of space they're allocated on the page. Plant hire legend Gomer Parry, for example, is a fantastically realised character; funny, entertaining, original and often pivotal to the plot.

Phil has created an imaginary town (or village) in Ledwardine with its own traditions, prejudices and history, and it's beautifully orchestrated and of course, home to Merrily and her sometimes wayward daughter and drug-damaged boyfriend. This one - my personal favourite - takes place mainly though in Hay-on-Wye. It's a compulsive read from the opening page. It's his usual blend of sly humour, scares and suspense - but one in which I think he surpasses himself with the sheer power of the storytelling. I cannot recommend this book strongly enough.

Lori says

Merrily on her own. No Lol (on tour), no Jane (on a dig) and only a teeny bit of Gomer. This story was so good I didn't miss them. Besides Frannie Bliss was there and it was fabulous to see Betty and Robin Thorogood and retired policeman Gwyn Arthur Jones returned from their first appearance in Crown of Lights. This was an exceptionally creepy novel. Having Merrily solitarily working through the convoluted evilness in this book made it all the more powerful. Back at Hay on Wye, Merrily is engaged by Frannie to help him sort through the mysterious findings in the home of an elderly man found drowned at the point where the River Wye intersects with Dulas Brook, an apparently anciently spiritual location. While in Hay, Merrily crosses paths with Robin and Betty who are trying to open a pagan bookstore in a building with some definitely creepy undertones. Throw in the mysterious disappearance of a young policewoman and you've got a compelling storyline. Then Gwyn Arthur Jones appears and helps tie all these seemingly disparate pieces into a common thread dating back 30 years ago when two young women mysteriously went missing. Phil Rickman never disappoints and this, the 12th Merrily Watkins novel, is one of the best.

Jamie Collins says

I love the atmosphere of a Merrily Watkins novel, and I saved this for Halloween although it turned out to be less ghostly than I expected. It's much more of a murder mystery than a spooky story.

It's set at Hay-on-Wye, which is really neat, but as usual Rickman focuses on the negative impact of modern society on the small town - specifically the struggling used booksellers are bitter about ebooks and internet commerce.

The plot involves "British neo-Nazi pagan factions" and was not terribly believable or compelling. I missed Lol and Jane and Gomer, who were largely absent, but I really like DI Bliss and it was nice to see our favorite benevolent pagans, the Thorogoods, again.

I don't know where that comment in the blurb about Merrily being on "the edge of madness" comes from. She's understandably feeling lonely in this book, and as always she struggles with her faith, but she's not

noticeably close to madness.

S.C. Skillman says

Phil Rickman continues to fascinate, as he explores the psychology of the border country. This latest story in the Merrily Watkins series makes compulsive reading. I like Merrily herself very much, and several of the other characters, though I was sad not to see Lol or a longed-for resolution of their relationship.

Rickman's combination of interests is guaranteed to provide page-turning stories. Having visited Hay-on-Wye last year I enjoyed reading about it and recognizing the locations the author describes. And of course the ways in which the border country inspires the imagination are numerous. Perhaps it's part of our national consciousness that "weird things happen on the borders". I know that in my own development of ideas for stories my mind has often strayed over the border to Wales as a suitable place for bizarre groups to have their HQ. It must be to do with the psychology of being on "the cusp".

Amongst many other elements of the story, I did enjoy the tension between the police forces of Dyfed-Powys and West Mercia as they wrangle about whose patch the criminal activity has taken place on. And I'm intrigued by Phil Rickman's ability to blend real and fictional subjects and characters; I'd love to know how he gets away with it. I visualize him grabbing one of his interviewees on his radio programme "Phil the Shelf" and saying "By the way, is it OK if I put you in my next novel, in your own identity, as a sinister ritual throat-slasher linked in to a bizarre Nazi occult group in the mountains?"
