



The Zig Zag Girl

Elly Griffiths

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Brighton, 1950.

When the body of a girl is found, cut into three, Detective Inspector Edgar Stephens is reminded of a magic trick, the Zig Zag Girl.

The inventor of the trick, Max Mephisto, is an old friend of Edgar's. They served together in the war as part of a shadowy unit called the Magic Men.

Max is still on the circuit, touring seaside towns in the company of ventriloquists, sword-swallowers and dancing girls. Changing times mean that variety is not what it once was, yet Max is reluctant to leave this world to help Edgar investigate. But when the dead girl turns out to be known to him, Max changes his mind.

Another death, another magic trick: Edgar and Max become convinced that the answer to the murders lies in their army days. When Edgar receives a letter warning of another 'trick', the Wolf Trap, he knows that they are all in danger...

The Zig Zag Girl Details

Date : Published November 6th 2014 by Quercus

ISBN :

Author : Elly Griffiths

Format : Kindle Edition 384 pages

Genre : Mystery, Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Crime

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From Reader Review The Zig Zag Girl for online ebook

LJ says

First Sentence: “Looks as if someone’s sliced her into three,” said Solomon Carter, the police surgeon, chattily.

Two thirds of a female body have been found; the head and the legs. Having been a member of “The Magic Men,” a Secret Service team of which he had been part during WWII, leads Edgar to reconnect with fellow member, Max Mephisto, especially after the shocking identify of the victim has been learned. A letter delivered to Edgar with the name of another magic trick, and another death, focuses him, with Max’s help, to find the rest of their old team...and the killer.

It is always interesting to learn the “how” behind magic tricks. And to consider the existence of a team of magicians, each with their own special skill, is particularly intriguing. In addition to Edgar, Griffith’s employs an effective segue to the past, informing us of the significant player, their skills and how they fit together. It is interesting that she chooses to insert this later in the story, but no less effective for so doing.

Griffiths has truly captured the feeling of stagecraft and the world behind the theater curtain. Although it is universal of all cultures, books set in the UK seem often to utilize the theme of a suspicion of forgiveness and hope of the perpetrator of violent crime being a foreigner. This is quite understandable being this soon after the War, but it need also be remembered that this was a time when people doubted television would ever succeed, thus limiting the exposure to those beyond their shores.

On the other hand, the Brits seem to have an ongoing regard for the old beliefs, including an acceptance of ghosts.”Naturally, the police station had its resident ghosts. The site was once a medieval monastery...and it was said that sometimes a monk could be seen moving casually through the thick stone walls of the basement.” But fear not, although this is anything but a paranormal mystery. Such injections do add to the sense of theatrically.

One can appreciate Griffith’s wry humour—“Max had a sudden vision of the Titanic tilting into the sea while the orchestra (hopefully in better tune than this one) played on.”—and her very visual descriptions—“He strolled through the picnicking families like Moses crossing the Red Sea. Moses in Italian shoes.”

“The Zig Zag Girl” very effectively and steadily builds the suspense and tension, throwing in an excellent twist, with another twist upon that, and another upon that. Well done, Ms. Griffiths on a very good start to a new series.

THE ZIG-ZAG GIRL (Pol Proc-Det. Edgar Stephens- England – early 1950s) – VG
Griffiths, Elly – 1st in series
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt - Sept 2015

Allison says

I really enjoyed the setting of this historical mystery. It's set in the British seaside town of Brighton in post World War II, and the main characters are a policeman and his wartime friend, a performing magician. We get a fascinating glimpse of the variety show world in the times when TV was just about to take over entertainment. That's what really helped to set this apart from other historical mysteries.

I did have my suspicions about the murderer quite early on, but there was plenty of doubt to keep me questioning, so the mystery was satisfying enough.

I always find that it's being able to invest in the characters that really makes a mystery for me, and that was definitely the case here. I found myself growing quite attached to the policeman and his magician friend. Ultimately, I cared what was going to happen to them, and that's what will bring me back to the series again in the future.

Rob Kitchin says

I loved the title, cover and premise for *The Zig Zag Girl*, but was disappointed by the story itself. I've liked Elly Griffiths 'Ruth Galloway' series and given my taste for fiction set in the 1930s-1950s, interest in police procedurals and tales relating to the Second World War, I had high hopes for the book. However, the police procedural elements were unrealistic and the war-time aspects full of inaccuracies and fanciful ideas. For example, the case concerns a high profile set of murders, yet the only people actively investigating them are a bumbling cop and his magician friend rather than a sizable investigative team. Moreover, the police response to the threats is minimal, there are no meetings with media, and there is little senior management involvement. A junior WAAF officer who pushes aircraft round a board in a control room is somehow promoted to head up a whole secret service section. In Inverness the Magic Men build an aircraft carrier (called a battleship): somehow they can work on it to build it, but it is also so flimsy that a man can't stand on it to send up a flare so they have to put a woman on it do that job (and she's lowered on from an aircraft at a time when helicopters were extremely rare). She shoots the flare, it lands on the very long ship (a few hundred feet) and it catches fire and somehow she can't get off before it burns out as she's obviously incapable of jumping into the sea. The timeline of the war is foreshortened: a few months after the Norway campaign (1940) Edgar's recruited into the secret service and sent to Inverness (p. 126); after two years there the company is disbanded and he works at a desk job for a couple of months waiting for the war to end (p. 271) -- somehow 3 years have disappeared. I could go on. Indeed, the plot in general relied on awkward plot devices and unlikely coincidences and the denouement was very weak. Further, the narrative had minor continuity errors (e.g., on page 44 Edgar watches Charis die, on page 152 he is told two days later she is dead because he wasn't there). I don't mind some fanciful details or logical inconsistencies in a story, but in this case there were just too many and the result was that I simply did not buy into the tale. Overall, whilst the premise is interesting, the execution and attention to detail is not and my feeling is the book lacked research and it really needed the attention of a critical editor with domain knowledge of policing and the Second World War to remove/amend the most fanciful bits.

Marianne says

The Zig Zag Girl is the first book in the Stephens and Mephisto Mystery series by British author, Elly Griffiths. Brighton, England, 1950: the young woman had been sawn in three; the parts, contained in black wooden boxes fastened with brass clips, were discovered in the Left Luggage room of the railway station.

Witness descriptions are vague, but several aspects of the case cause DI Edgar Stephens, lead investigator, to travel to Eastbourne to seek out Max Mephisto, magician.

Their association began in Inverness during the war, when they were part of a Secret Service team, the Magic Men, but a tragic event had seen the end of team, and their involvement. The resemblance to one of Max's tricks, the Zig Zag Girl, is strong, but he cannot cast any light on the matter, even when he learns, to his shock, the identity of the victim. When Max's engagements bring him to Brighton, another death staged as a magic trick leads him to team up with Edgar in an effort to find the killer.

In keeping with the magic trick theme, Griffiths cleverly divides her novel into four parts, aptly titled: The Build-Up, Misdirection, Raising the Stakes and The Reveal. She uses two narrators, Edgar and Max, to convey different parts of the story as well as to give different perspectives on events. The immediate post-war era ensures the absence of mobile phones, internet, DNA and even many personal vehicles; thus the detective work relies on heavily on legwork, personal visits and intelligent deduction.

Griffiths gives the reader characters that are real and flawed; some are vain and selfish; others distracted by misdirection and convinced by illusion. Her plot is clever and original and has a few twists that even the most astute reader may fail to anticipate. The atmosphere of post-war Britain is skilfully evoked with description, dialogue and the attitudes common at the time. This is an excellent murder mystery from the author of the Ruth Galloway crime novels, and fans will not be disappointed.

Raven says

I always think it's a brave decision by an established series author such as Griffiths with her hugely popular Ruth Galloway novels, to step outside of the familiar and tackle a standalone (or opener to a possible new series). I had similar fears with Belinda Bauer, on the publication of *Rubbernecker*, but Griffiths like Bauer has succeeded admirably in my opinion. Having said that, I would partly put my enjoyment of *The Zig Zag Girl* down to my own fascination with the world of magic, particularly of this period and earlier, so many of the little nods and references to magic resonated very well with me- Hugh D. Nee indeed! However, where I think Griffiths succeeds so well in this book, is the underlying sense of fun that she seems to be having, and that we can participate in, along the way. There are a host of great little comic interludes and one-liners, that add another dimension to what is essentially a more graphic and souped-up classic Golden Age mystery, including the trusty use of tea cup and poison, transported into 1950's Brighton. The unerring sense of darkness, and the slight seediness and desperation of the world which Max in particular resides in, is set against the lighter comic tone with great effect, reminding me strongly of the brilliant Bryant & May mysteries by Christopher Fowler. Add into the plot the pivoting timeline, charting the beginnings of the less confident Edgar's and uber confident Max's friendship, with their undercover and top secret wartime mission, and *The Zig Zag Girl*, draws us into its own little illusionist's trick where nothing is quite as it appears...

I am a self confessed fan of Griffiths, and what I enjoy most about her writing is her characterisation, and this book does not disappoint. Every character is incredibly well-delineated, no matter how small or large part they play in the plot. I've already identified the essential difference between policeman Edgar and showman Max in terms of confidence, but it's incredibly interesting to see how this chalk-and-cheese combo, and their understated loyalty to each other, join forces to catch a killer. Likewise, the character of Mulholland is joyous- in common parlance he would be a total **** – and I enjoyed the acerbic mocking by

Max of Mulholland's purported mesmerist skills and comic talent. He has none. There is also a wonderfully credible female character with Ruby, harbouring designs on being a world famous female magician in her own right, who entrals Edgar, but strangely manages to resist the obvious appeal of the suave and cool Max. These characters draw you in completely, and I genuinely cared about the peril each faces as the story unfolds. So in conclusion, I was rather keen on *The Zig Zag Girl*, with its terrific blend of light and dark mood, the strength of the characters, the use of the shabby seaside locations, and the careful balance of historic period detail. All in all it's fun, a jolly good murder mystery, with a few unexpected shocks along the way to jolt the reader. Magic...

Liz Barnsley says

I'm a fan of Elly Griffiths Ruth Galloway novels so was really looking forward to diving into this one, a standalone novel inspired by her Grandfather.

I loved it. Beautifully written to give a sense of the time, a terrific mystery story and a wonderful flow, plus some great characters made this a really really fun read.

Edgar, Max and the so called "Magic Men" are a fascinating and eclectic bunch, brought back together by a strange murder that mimicks an old magic trick – *The Zig Zag Girl*. As Edgar investigates he looks to Max to help him work out what is going on and their friendship is rekindled.

There was a delightful old school feel to the prose, very different from the Galloway novels – Christie-esque in style to suit the era, despite the violence it is quite a gentle read. in some ways and Ms Griffiths has caught the sense of the theatre community brilliantly. The glamorous and the less glamourous side merge to give a realistic feeling to it all, you can almost imagine yourself right there. The back story involving the Magic Men during the war is evocative and intriguing as well – and the mystery element is well imagined as the author brings the two strands together to paint a full picture.

This is definitely one of my favourite mystery novels of the year so far, clever misdirection, a very enchanting look at the world of magic and a captivating and compelling story means that this definitely comes Highly Recommended from me.

Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says

Elly Griffiths popular Ruth Galloway series has been on my to-read list for sometime but I've been loathe to start a new series given my current reading commitments. I pounced then on the opportunity to read her first stand alone, *The Zig Zag Girl*.

When the head and legs of a young woman are discovered in two black cases at Brighton train station, Detective Inspector Edgar Stephens doesn't have to wait long to discover the whereabouts of her torso when a third box is delivered to him at work. Curiously the box is addressed using his military rank, Captain, and the state of the woman's body reminds Edgar of a magician's trick, known as the Zig Zag Girl, performed by an old army buddy, Max Mephisto. Assuming the coincidence is unlikely, especially when the girl is

identified as Max's pre-war stage assistant, Edgar tracks down Max, a popular theater magician and then the rest of the men he served with, a group known as the 'Magic Men' - recruited for a top secret special assignment during World War II. After another death, another gruesome magic trick gone awry, Edgar realises that the Magic Men are being targeted and he must race to unmask the killer before they perform their final deadly trick.

The Zig Zag Girl is set largely in Brighton, England during the 1950's and Griffiths skilfully evokes the post war era and the shabbiness of the neglected seaside town. Griffiths is said to have drawn on her own family history - her grandfather was a music hall comedian and her mother grew up 'backstage' - to authentically recreate the variety theater scene of the time.

Edgar is a likeable character, a little reserved and weary but thoughtful and steadfast. Max is more flamboyant, befitting a magician, and the two make a good team. The world of the theater allows Griffiths to introduce some additional colourful characters, and the 'Magic Men' are a quirky lot too.

The mystery is well thought out, using several red herrings to distract the reader from identifying the murderer too quickly. A little humour and a touch of romance lighten the more gruesome criminal elements of the story, and the background of the Magic Men provides added interest.

A clever, entertaining mystery, I really enjoyed The Zig Zag Girl, I think I need to make room in my schedule for The Crossing Places sooner, rather than later.

Brenda says

This book is a departure from the Ruth Galloway series and starts a new series. The main character is Edgar Stephens, currently a Detective Inspector, formerly a member of WWII's the Magic Men. When a case involves a victim who was cut into thirds ala a magic trick called The Zig Zag Girl, Edgar contacts Max Mephisto, a fellow member of the Magic Men who had invented the magic trick.

This was an enjoyable book, but I think not of the same caliber as the Ruth Galloway books. This book didn't grab me, but took my hand and walked me inside. It took its time introducing the members of the Magic Men and how they'd fared since the war. It didn't race to the conclusion, but strolled along to reveal the who and why.

There is a second book to this series, which I will read, but I don't know if it goes any further.

Magdalena aka A Bookaholic Swede says

I saw that book two is coming out now this fall and thought perhaps it was time to read the first book since I have had the ARC just around a year waiting for me to read. Elly Griffiths is the author of the Ruth Galloway series, a series I quite enjoy reading so I was curious to see how this new series would be.

The new series takes place in the 1950s Brighton and Detective Inspector Edgar Stephens must solve a case of a murdered woman. The body has been cut in three bits and this reminds him of the magic trick, the Zig Zag Girl. He knows the inventor of the trick, Max Mephisto, he is an old friend and they served together in

the war in a shadow unit called Magic Men. But who would kill a girl and why? And, then another one is killed and now they must really find the killer before more people are killed. And, it seems that the people that are killed are connected to the Magic Men...

It was interesting to read something other than Elly Griffiths usual series and I enjoyed a step back in time to the 50s just after the war with people that are trying to move on, but it has only been 5 years since it ended and the memories of it still linger over the country. For Edgar Stephens brings this case back memories of the war and the shadow unit he was in and the women he loved and lost. He hasn't really gotten over her and the way she died. And, now with the murder is he reunited with Max Mephisto, magician the man who invented the Zig Zag Girl. I just love magicians and I enjoyed the combination of a police and magician working together.

I found the case interesting because of the group of magicians, not all of them were magicians, of course, Edgar wasn't one. But they were gathered together to create illusions to stupefy the enemy. And, now it seems that there is a murderer among them.

But it was also not hard to figure things out, the story was good, but I found it too easy to figure things out. It lacked any real moments of surprises. I enjoyed reading it, it was a fine book and I want to read the next book. I just hope for a more intriguing plot.

3.5 stars

Thanks to Quercus Books and NetGalley for providing me with a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review!

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I thought this was an enjoyable, quick read in a fun time period and a fun setting - post WW2 in Brighton, and a body shows up in pieces. This leads to investigations of magicians and their assistants, a secret magic spy ring from the war, and pokey little British beach towns that still hire magicians and comedians.

I notice many of the reviews mention that they tried this series after loving the author's previous series, the Ruth Galloway series, so I'll have to check them out.

Aditi says

"Illusion is the first of all pleasures."

----Oscar Wilde

Elly Griffiths, an English author, have spin a thrilling tale of magic and illusions set in the post-WWII Britain in her new book, *The Zig Zag Girl*. This is her first book, after her very successful Dr Ruth Galloway series.

Synopsis:

Brighton, 1950.

When the body of a girl is found, cut into three, Detective Inspector Edgar Stephens is reminded of a magic trick, the Zig Zag Girl.

The inventor of the trick, Max Mephisto, is an old friend of Edgar's. They served together in the war as part of a shadowy unit called the Magic Men.

Max is still on the circuit, touring seaside towns in the company of ventriloquists, sword-swallowers and dancing girls. Changing times mean that variety is not what it once was, yet Max is reluctant to leave this world to help Edgar investigate. But when the dead girl turns out to be known to him, Max changes his mind.

Another death, another magic trick: Edgar and Max become convinced that the answer to the murders lies in their army days. When Edgar receives a letter warning of another 'trick', the Wolf Trap, he knows that they are all in danger.

Unfortunately, I never got a chance to read Griffiths' successful and popular series of Dr. Ruth Galloway. So, I'm completely new to her writing style and hence I won't be the fair judge to comment on her writing style compared to her previous series. Well, to be fair, the opening line of the book was an intriguing and edgy one, that instantly peaked my interest- a girl cut in three! Yes, Edgar Stephens is the Detective who is in charge of "The Zig Zag Girl" case, a body of a women sliced into three halves among which two halves were found in a suitcase in the Brighton railway station and the middle half was personally delivered to the Detective, and the whole set-up reminded him of a magic trick invented by one of his friend. Max Mephisto, the infamous magician and Edgar's best buddy from the war days. They were a part of a secret service team where they used to build illusions to fool and trick the enemy into thinking that the Allies had more resources than was actually the case.

Eventually, as the plot grew more mysterious and magical, the author took us to Edgar and Max's past days when they used to serve in the war, and when the body count increased rapidly, it became clear that their group was the only target in this case.

The writing is pretty nice, but not extraordinary, in fact, the way the author have build the plot is not that compelling, especially the flashbacks- it seems whenever the author took us back into reality there was always some loose ends in the flashbacks, like something missing. The characters undoubtedly very strong and striking. And the mystery element was made intriguing by layering the plot with some major twists and turns. The author crafted Edgar's 50s style of modus operandi is brilliantly but at times the author intentionally filled her plot with some missing blanks to keep us anticipating till the end.

The narrative is free-flowing but at times it became flat as the narration switched from the police investigation to Max's magic tricks. Edgar's character is pretty lonely and complicated and someone, whereas Max turns out to be the lively and most concerning character in the book. The climax or rather say the identity of the killer was very evident from the way the flashbacks were unfolding. So in a nutshell, it's an interesting read filled with lot of magic tricks and if you want to take a ride to the town of Brighton post world war two, then this the perfect book for you. Since from the dressing style to the civilian's life to the glam world to the streets to the cars, the author captured the 50s Brighton lively and vividly.

Verdict: *If you are a fan of mind-twisting crimes, then this is the perfect book for you.*

Courtesy: *Thanks to the author Elly Griffiths and the publicity director of Quercus, for giving me an opportunity to read and review the book.*

Lisa says

The Zig Zag girl by Elly Griffiths is the first in her new series DI Stephens & Max Mephisto I was intrigued at the beginning but it got a bit slow with all the character introductions there was too much hocus pocus & was very slow at times for me.

I couldn't get into the characters at all not that I still didn't turn the pages but it just didn't do anything for me I have read a few Ruth Galloway books in Miss Griffiths other series I found much better not sure if I want to read the second one in this series 3 stars.

sue says

I am a bit late in coming to the table to read this one.

But I am glad I got around finally to reading it, or should I say "listening" to it as I listened to it on Audio today.

I was lucky enough to get this from Quercus Books via Net Galley, but seeing as I have it on audio I decided to listen to this today whilst doing other chores.

We have Edgar, who is the DI.

And Max the magician.

Both of them know each other from a past that later comes to light as Edgar is reporting back to his Sergeant.

Its based around the seaside town of Brighton, where we are not far from Eastbourne and surrounding areas. So a resort where there are Theatre's and such and boarding homes where actresses and actors and those on the stage could be 'put up' for the duration of they're stay there while performing.

A body is found. But its an usual case because this body comes in three parts, and each is inside a box. These boxes remind Edgar of a trick, where they lay a person inside and they are split, then knives are put between the splits appearing that the person has been chopped into three parts.

Except, this is no usual magicians trick box, the middle one that holds the torso is slightly bigger than the rest, what is the reason for this? Well, you will need to find out.

The woman who is pretty in appearance even though dead.....
who is she?

Max the magician is not happy to be involved with the Police, but he is happy to chat to his old friend Edgar who wants to ask him questions.

Edgar goes to a show, watches the 'turns' and then his friend Max performs his 'turn'.

After the show Edgar goes backstage, its not the brightest place to be, its dusty, its hectic, girls rushing

around in their feathered costumes and it can appear to be manic. Then he spies his friend Max, so he and him share a whisky together. He is surprised that Max has a dressing room all to himself as others have to share, but Max is well known, and Max is not humble enough to keep quiet about that!

Edgar fishes around and asks Max about some of the magic acts, at first Max isn't wanting to reveal anything. But then he does.

One thought comes into Edgars mind, why hasn't Max got a female working for him in the act.

It was a very interesting case unfolding as I read.

You need to remember its around the turn of the 1950s when the TV is just about becoming popular and peoples tastes in being entertained are changing.

This reminded me of an afternoon show, a whodunnit and why. Fast paced at first, halfway was good but did dip a little, however the ending was good and well worth keeping with.

All in all, a very enjoyable plot and forward moving story.

Diane S ? says

Brighton, 1950, variety shows are on the way out, magic shows not as popular as they had been, television soon to make its appearance. After the war Edgar wanted to make a difference in people's lives so though he was expected to return to Oxford, he decided instead to become a policeman. When a body is delivered to the station in pieces, it becomes Inspector Edgar's case, a case that will bring him to Max Memphisto a famous magician and a man that Edgar served with in a secret unit called the Magic Men.

The atmosphere of this novel is authentic and wonderful. So much about magic shows and the theater, even knowing that a magicians greatest friend is misdirection did not help me solve this case. I did have a few ideas but I guess I am just not clever enough. The characters are colorful, Max and Diablo alternately amusing or melancholy. Secrets from past, clues to follow left by the killer, murders done in ways mimicking magic acts, all leaving a trail, but remember red herrings and misdirection. The historical details are an additional bonus, all helping to immerse the reader in both this case and the time period.

A brilliant start to what I hope is a new series, by Galloway.

Eva says

I'm sure many of you are familiar with Elly Griffiths' other series featuring Ruth Galloway (So behind on that one as well. I've only read four ?) but this one is very different. I'd heard quite a lot about The Vanishing Box, the fourth book in this Stephens and Mephisto Mystery series but as always, I was compelled to start at the beginning.

When the body of a young girl is found, DI Stephens is immediately reminded of a magic trick gone wrong. The girl's body has been cut up into three pieces, just like the Zig Zag Girl trick. DI Stephens calls in the help of his old friend, Max Mephisto, with whom he served in the war. Max is a good old-fashioned magician who is still touring around the country from venue to venue in a world that's constantly changing and where variety show entertainers may just be a dying breed.

Max is reluctant to help until it turns out the dead girl was known to him. When another body turns up, Stephens and Mephisto become convinced that the answer is to be found in their army days. But can they stop the killer before they strike again?

Set in 1950's Brighton, *The Zig Zag Girl* is an incredibly original combination of police work with the intriguing world of magic and variety shows. Now, I did figure it out but that didn't bother me at all. The atmosphere, the fantastic setting and the fabulously colourful and sometimes quirky characters had me completely enthralled.

This cleverly plotted and addictive story had me utterly captivated and it's such a delight to step away from the more modern crime fiction. DI Stephens doesn't have access to all the fancy gadgets and resources that are around these days. No smartphones, no computers, no databases. All he has is his wit and his gut instinct and nobody bats an eyelid when he pulls in an amateur to help out with his investigation.

I'm glad I have this in-built urge to start a series at the beginning, no matter how many books there are already. Granted, I don't know how the other books progress but I feel I may not have connected to these characters the way I did if I had jumped right into book four. As it is, I'm left wanting more from both of them as I'm sure there is a lot more background to discover about Stephens and Mephisto.

Elly Griffiths' decision to tackle something completely different sure paid off. I enjoyed this historical mystery immensely and I can't wait to find the time to get caught up on the rest of the series.
