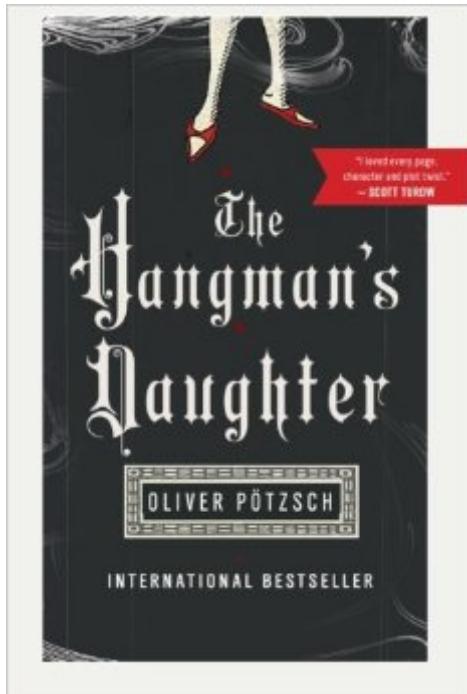


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The Hangman's Daughter (Hangman's Daughter Tales)



Synopsis

Germany, 1660: When a dying boy is pulled from the river with a mark crudely tattooed on his shoulder, hangman Jakob Kuisl is called upon to investigate whether witchcraft is at play. So begins The Hangman's Daughter--the chillingly detailed, fast-paced historical thriller from German television screenwriter Oliver Pötzsch, a descendant of the Kuisls, a famous Bavarian executioner clan. Magdalena, the clever and headstrong daughter of Bavarian hangman Jakob Kuisl, lives with her father outside the village walls and is destined to be married off to another hangman's son "except that the town physician's son is hopelessly in love with her. And her father's wisdom and empathy are as unusual as his despised profession. It is 1659, the Thirty Years' War has finally ended, and there hasn't been a witchcraft mania in decades. But now, a drowning and gruesomely injured boy, tattooed with the mark of a witch, is pulled from a river and the villagers suspect the local midwife, Martha Stechlin. Jakob Kuisl is charged with extracting a confession from her and torturing her until he gets one. Convinced she is innocent, he, Magdalena, and her would-be suitor to race against the clock to find the true killer. Approaching Walpurgisnacht, when witches are believed to dance in the forest and mate with the devil, another tattooed orphan is found dead and the town becomes frenzied. More than one person has spotted what looks like the devil "a man with a hand made only of bones. The hangman, his daughter, and the doctor's son face a terrifying and very real enemy. Taking us back in history to a place where autopsies were blasphemous, coffee was an exotic drink, dried toads were the recommended remedy for the plague, and the devil was as real as anything, The Hangman's Daughter brings to cinematic life the sights, sounds, and smells of seventeenth-century Bavaria, telling the engrossing story of a compassionate hangman who will live on in readers' imaginations long after they've put down the novel.

Book Information

Series: Hangman's Daughter Tales (Book 1)

Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; Rep Rei edition (August 2, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 054774501X

ISBN-13: 978-0547745015

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1.1 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (3,701 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #84,947 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #89 in Books > Literature & Fiction > World Literature > European > German #187 in Books > Mystery, Thriller & Suspense > Thrillers & Suspense > Supernatural > Witches & Wizards #326 in Books > Mystery, Thriller & Suspense > Mystery > Supernatural > Witches & Wizards

Customer Reviews

The Hangman's Daughter seems to be one of this year's buzz books. I read a few professional reviews and it really seemed like an interesting story. Historical thrillers are like catnip to me, and this one is a translation from the original German book which was written by a descendant of the book's fictionalized main character. So, my hopes were high. Unfortunately, the writing in the book was uneven enough that the overall package was not as terrific as I'd hoped. This book tells the tale of Jakob Kuisl, a hangman with a heart in a small Bavarian town in the 1600's. Naturally, his daughter also has a role in the book, though she is not as prominent as one might expect from the title. In any event, some murders in the town result in the arrest of a midwife for witchcraft, and Jakob and some other well-meaning citizens try to solve the mystery before time runs out for the midwife. Meanwhile, the majority of the village's aldermen are uninterested in the truth and are only interested in protecting their money. The historical aspects of the story are very interesting, and the beginning of the book got off to such an excellent, riveting, and fast-paced start that I recommended it to a friend when I was about halfway through. Unfortunately, things started to slide downhill after that (if you are reading this: sorry Amanda!). The biggest problem with the book were the 'action' scenes. After the mystery is laid out there is a lot of chasing and hiding and fighting, etc, but not enough to hold my interest. These were sections where I was skimming just to get through them. In addition, by the time the action started, I found myself not caring overly much about either the villains or the heroes in the story.

This English edition of "The Hangman's Daughter" is Lee Chadeayne's translation of "Die Henkerstochter", by Oliver Pötzsch. (There's an umlaut over the "o" in his name, but I don't know how to make that!) The mystery's last chapter is titled "A Kind of Postscript", where Pötzsch describes how he is a descendent of the real-life Kuisl executioner family. He uses the names of a real forebear for his protagonist, Jakob Kuisl, the official town hangman, and Jakob's immediate family. Though Pötzsch has researched the life and times of a Bavarian hangman and the town he lives in, this particular storyline, murder and other characters are fictional. This is very interesting

stuff. As is made clear in the novel, executioners were necessary for carrying out legal death sentences, but they and their families were shunned outcasts. They pretty much married only within other executioner families. In addition, executioners were the torturers back when a confession through torture was the legal method of determining guilt. Humans have unlimited ability to rationalize anything. So a suspect is tortured until she confesses to the crime. She is not guilty until she confesses. The torture continues until she confesses, after which she is put to death, or until she dies from the torture without confessing. The moral of the story is, don't make anyone mad enough to blame you for something. I guess when I think "tried for witchcraft", I usually think "Inquisition". But it wasn't just the church that held trials for accused witches. Anybody could claim injury from a witch, and the secular authorities held their own trials for witchcraft. For example, the 1692 Salem Witch Trials were secular.* And it's the same in "The Hangman's Daughter".

The sensory-descriptive writing of Oliver Pötzsch takes one back in history to that place in time near the end of the Renaissance and before the Enlightenment where beliefs in witches empowered by the devil were still strongly held in the Bavarian town of Schongau. His startling prologue about the gory execution of Elisabeth Clement in October 1624 by Jakob Kuisl's father, the town executioner, sets the stage for the novel's main story thirty-five years later involving Jakob as the new executioner, his daughter Magdalena, and her love interest Simon Fronwieser, the town's physician's son. The witch trials and executions of numerous women from years ago have cooled down, but the recent death of a child bearing a witch's mark threatens to revive them. Since the child and some of his comrades who turn up missing were with the midwife Martha Stechlin, she is arrested and held in the town's keep to be tortured by Kuisl for a confession. Martha assisted Kuisl's wife in the birth of Jakob's own children. He, his daughter, and Simon believe she is innocent and act as detectives to find the true murderer with the hope of saving Martha from execution. One of the elements that makes this novel so moving is that Kuisl doesn't enjoy torturing and killing innocent people. He has a conscience. He also believes in God, although he finds God more in the beauties of nature than in mankind. Nonetheless, he inherited the job from his father who inherited it from his father. It is just a job, and when he tortures innocent people, including Martha, he realizes that if he didn't do it, someone else would. His affection for Martha, even assisting her to endure the suffering he inflicts, is unforgettable.

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