

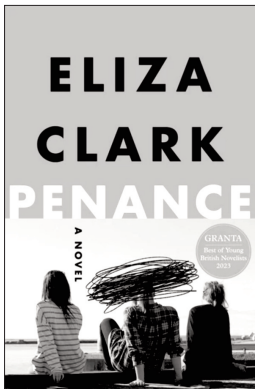
BOOKED & PRINTED

LAUREL FLORES FANTAUZZO

In a sleuth's search for the dead, especially for those destroyed by acts of violence, a frustrating obstacle always rises. The dead cannot issue rejoinders or corrections to anyone claiming to tell their stories. The living can confer only with those still living. The dead can speak only through memories and evidence they left behind—memories and clues adjudicated and edited by the living. It falls upon investigators to act with the utmost care, taking up the burden of ethics in pursuit of the truth. This month, *Booked and Printed* examines two books with compromised protagonists: men who act supposedly on behalf of justice for the dead, and who gradually find themselves guilty of decisions that breach the realms between the living and the deceased.

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In *PENANCE*, by Eliza Clark, a curious shift takes place in the book's earliest pages. A long disclaimer names an author different from the one on the



book's cover: Alec Z. Carelli. It describes his non-fiction book about the murder of a teenage girl, and a version of that book pulled from shelves in September 2022. The word "cancellation" does not appear in this section, but the publisher's defiant disclaimer claims it has re-published Carelli's book based on principles of readership freedom, despite the "offense" the author's "nonfiction" decisions may have caused in the recent past. *Penance's* opening strikes several moods: curiosity about what went wrong in the reporting of a murder, inflamed public debate (likely fueled by social media, and furthered by this second publisher), and intriguing confusion about whose book is whose. Readers are handed immediate layers to wade through. This is a book about a murder labeled nonfiction, wracked by painful discourse. But the journalistic controversy, embattled male author, and story actually comprise a fiction novel written by Clark.

Penance announces itself early, then, as a work of fiction determined to make contemporary commentary on the act of true-crime storytelling. The narrator, Carelli, is a washed-up, once-respected, middle-aged journalist, in terrible pain after the suicide of his young adult daughter. It's an intriguing impetus, besides his own need for fame, that apparently com-

pels him to investigate the murder of sixteen-year-old Joan Wilson in a small, seaside English town. The perpetrators were Joan's young women classmates from high school, and her murder was egregiously violent. Carelli, in the opening to his work, claims a moral high ground. He is disgusted by American true-crime podcasts' commentaries on the killing, shallow at best and obscene at worst, in edited transcripts he includes for readers. But in his own portrayals of himself conducting his reportage, readers can clue into his questionable, less-than-ethical behavior as an older man chasing after the inner lives of teenaged girls and their traumatized families.

Penance is smart and discomfiting. Its fictionalized nonfiction draws heavily from real-life phenomena. Teen girls' apparent obsession with creating a small hell on earth bears a striking resemblance to the media frenzy around the Slenderman stabbings. The two perpetrators of a fictitious school shooting gain an online fandom that induces shudders, calling to mind Reddit and 4chan threads that give inordinate attention to real-life killers.

It can be difficult to discern when the book is satirizing the morally questionable landscape of true-crime devotion, and when the book skirts complicity with its more lurid, seductive elements. Carelli describes an (invented) American school shooting in painstaking detail. Later, instead of providing any further context or detail, he reminds readers they can Google Joan Wilson's catalogue of torturous injuries. In those moments, is the book confronting us? Cackling at us? Laughter and confrontation are indeed the tasks of satire. But does the depiction of violent crime need more cynicism, ridicule, and pessimism than what contemporary, very-online societies already have on offer? *Penance* and its methods guess yes.

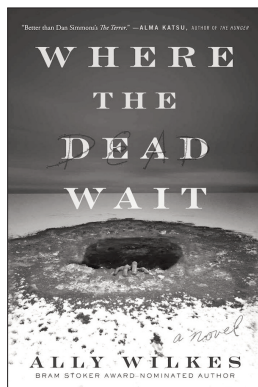
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In the late 1800s, white men explorers, funded by their governments and by private industries, traveled to the Arctic regions. While they called themselves pioneers in the act of discovery, they made incursions into landscapes already inhabited by indigenous peoples. By sea and land, foreign explorers unused to the cold climate endured starvation, frostbite, wildlife encounters, and violent mutinies by their own crews. In **WHERE THE DEAD WAIT**, by Ally Wilkes, one man, William Day, remains haunted by a doomed mission he led. Most of his shipmates on the *Reckoning* died of horrendous diseases and attacks. He and his fellow crew survived only through cannibalism, and through other, unspeakable acts that continue to torment Day.

Over a decade after his disgraced return to his home country, Day learns that his most beloved and fearsome fellow survivor, Jesse Stevens, has gone missing in the Arctic. Stevens's wife, a spirit medium, commissions Day as captain of a new ship and a new mission: to return to the location of their first doomed ship and bring Stevens home.

With her second novel about a polar expedition gone horribly wrong, Ally Wilkes establishes herself as a master of grotesque, macabre injuries, horrific hauntings, and utterly disastrous romantic feelings. Her Victorian Gothic descriptions, set in the Arctic, bring new terror to cold temperatures, hunger, disease, and mutinous emotions. Day, with his terrible guilt, moral confusion, and deadly uncertainty, is the memorable lead of a vividly drawn cast of characters. He is a reluctant leader from the beginning, always looking to Stevens for guidance.

Instantly, from the opening scenes, readers are drawn through a morass of physical suffering, and the moral depravity that might possess men overcome by the landscape they meant to explore and control. In Day's second mission to recover Stevens, new intrigues take shape. A reporter, pen always at the ready, keeps pulling at what horrors might still be uncovered about Day's earlier expedition. The ship's observant doctor, who has known Day since his youth, doubts Day's own fitness as captain. The mystery of Stevens's disappearance will come to the fore of Day's consciousness, forcing him, through nightmares and revelations, to confront his own inner hauntings, and his own tortured relationship to the dead. The decisions we leave behind in the dark will rarely ever stay there.



ALL POINTS BULLETIN: Nancy Springer's *ENOLA HOLMES AND THE MARK OF THE MONGOOSE*, latest in a series that has been adapted for film by Netflix since 2020, is available now from Wednesday Books (St. Martin's). • *DUNLEAVY*, a thriller by Mark Hannon, was released in September 2023 from Encircle Publications. • Jim Fusilli's *THE PRICE YOU PAY* will be out in January 2024. • Reissues of already published Holmes on the Range novels by Steve Hockensmith—as well as a new title in the series (see *HUNTERS OF THE DEAD*, Rough Edges Press)—are now available.