



Gilded Needles

Michael McDowell

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German Black Lena was queen of The Black Triangle, Manhattan's decadent empire of opium dens, gambling casinos, drunken sailors, gaudy hookers, and back room abortions. With her daughters and grandchildren, Black Lena led a ring of consummate female criminals - women skilled in the art of cruelty.

Only a few blocks away, amidst the elegant mansions and lily-white reputations of Gramercy Park and Washington Square lived Judge James Stallworth. He was determined to crush Lena's evil crew, and with icy indifference he ordered three deaths in her family.

Then, one Sunday, all the Stallworths receive individual invitations - invitations to their own funerals. Black Lena has vowed a reign of revenge. Can even the Stallworth fortune and awesome power save them from her diabolical lust for revenge?

Gilded Needles Details

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Author : Michael McDowell

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From Reader Review *Gilded Needles* for online ebook

Kate says

The upper class Stallworths, looking to gain political favour, decide to wage war on the squalid NY district called The Black Triangle. The Shanks family, known for all manner of criminal activity, get caught in the crosshairs of the family's investigations in the area. When matters turn deadly, Black Lena decides to seek vengeance for the loss of her kin.

Set in the late 1800s, this book is rich in historical detail and you get a complete sense of the era. The authors descriptions of life in the triangle are horrific, the poverty and depravity are all too real and whilst some of the activity there is abhorrent, you can't help but feel empathy for those who have little control over their circumstances.

The characters, whilst well enough drawn for the story, remain somewhat of a mystery overall. The Stallworths are superficial people, except for the charitable Helen, they only care about gaining power to move up in society. Their crusade is nothing to do with improving the area or the lives of those who live there, but showing up the Democrats as being ineffective in government and paving the way for a republican. The Shanks are even more mysterious and I never felt I got to know this family very well. There was just enough detail there to connect me to the read but character development didn't really happen and in a strange way wasn't really needed for this tale of revenge.

The pacing isn't fast but there's so much detail around the areas and era that it completely hooks you from the first chapter. The first half of the book perfectly sets up the 'revenge' part as you get pulled into the lives of both families. Whilst I love revenge stories and thought the Stallworths had it coming, even I felt sorry for them as their comeuppance was vicious, shocking and total.

Highly recommended.

Lukas (LukeLaneReads) says

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned...

"Gilded Needles" is the tale of an all-female crime circuit and the lengths they go to exact revenge on a judge who prosecuted one of their family...and it's terrific!

I REALLY enjoyed this. I was expecting more of a horror theme based upon the author's previous work but in truth it's more of a crime drama that happens to have some murders thrown in. I thought the author did a great job setting up not only the seedy setting, but the characters (and there's quite a few of them) are all well rounded and believable. The matriarch of the crime family manages to come off as menacing despite being an old lady, and overall it's just a fun and enjoyably seedy tale.

Excited to pick up some more of McDowell's books soon!

4 stars ****

Nancy Oakes says

Gilded Needles is without a doubt one of the darkest, creepiest tales of revenge that I've ever had the

pleasure to have read.

The setting of *Gilded Needles* is New York, 1882. The first thing that struck me on opening the book was the most excellent panoramic view of the city as the old year changes into the new. The author provides us here with a glimpse across the spectrum into what's happening at that moment, giving us a peek at the lives of "... the poor whose poverty was such that they would die of it," the "criminals whose criminality was no final guarantee against the poverty they tried to escape," the "mildly prosperous and moderately respectable," and finally, for the "very rich who needn't trouble themselves with respectability." But most importantly for the purposes of this book, there is the "Black Triangle," a "little space that lies west of MacDougal, between say Canal and Bleecker Streets." It is a place where "horror festers," located "within half an hour's walk of the most fashionable houses of the city." It is in this small slice of the city that "Black" Lena Shanks and her family run their criminal enterprises; everything from illegal abortions, receiving stolen goods, selling dead bodies, you name it. However, the denizens of the Black Triangle aren't limited to the poor or the criminal -- it is also a favorite locale for the more "respectable" citizens on its outskirts for gambling, picking up prostitutes, and whatever other pleasures they desire that are definitely not found say, in Gramercy Park.

It is just one of these "respectable" people who sets this story in motion. Young Benjamin Stallworth is having his fun slumming in the Black Triangle, when he notices Lena. She recognizes his eyes, remembering the time when a certain Judge Stallworth sentenced her husband to death and had her children taken away while she also went to prison. In the meantime, the Judge and his son-in-law, Duncan Phair, have decided to build their political and social clout by trying to take down the criminals and exposing the "evils" of the Black Triangle, publicizing their efforts in the newspaper. But while the plan seems to be working, one particular event sends Lena and her family over the edge, and now she's looking for revenge. And it definitely isn't going to be pretty. The novel goes back and forth between the Shanks family and the Stallworths, who really don't help themselves with their own arrogance and their lack of understanding of human nature.

Gilded Needles is written in a way that reminds me so very much of the 19th-century "city mysteries" novels I've read, exposing the city's dark, seamy underbelly and scratching off the veneer of respectability among the upper classes. McDowell has captured the style of this sort of old novel while making it his own; he is one of the best dark fiction writers whose work I've had the pleasure to have read. *Gilded Needles* is seriously one of the most horrific non-horror stories I've read in a while -- bleak, very Dickensian and well, let's just say that it's definitely not for the faint of heart. At the same time, it is absolutely one of those books that once picked up will not easily be put down, and to be honest, I was still shaking after I'd finally turned the last page.

I highly, highly recommend this one -- a definite no miss for readers of dark fiction and historical crime fiction.

BrokenTune says

"You are falling into inanity," said Judge Stallworth coldly. "I have told you, the lower classes do not take revenge upon the upper."

My third McDowell and I think I am a little in love with his writing. How else did I just enjoy a work of horror fiction with a blood-curdling and violent revenge plot at the heart of its story?

In an earlier update I mentioned that I could see some similarities between Gilded Needles and The Godfather. I still believe this is true. Except that Black Lena Shanks and her daughters are far superior in every aspect to any of the Corleones:

1. They seek to grow their business interests openly.
2. They do not pick fights with rivalling families for reasons of business. When they escalate operations, it is for deeply personal reasons. And, yet, they limit extent of their wrath and try to shield the innocents bystanders.
3. They are not afraid to take on "the man" - or in this case, the police, a senior judge, the newspapers, and pretty much all of "polite society".

I loved the scene-setting that McDowell uses in the first chapters to give us that panoramic view of the Black Triangle (a district in the underbelly of New York) on New Year's Eve 1881: we get to be drawn right into the crowd and mingle with prostitutes, opium addicts, drunks, the sick, and all the other destitute characters that make up the society outcasts. All of whom are outside the law, because the law neglects them, and outside of society because they do not deemed to belong.

Here is another aspect where Gilded Needles compares with The Godfather: I was struck that the society described in The Godfather excluded and dismissed minorities (and women) as valueless disposables. In Gilded Needles, the society is based on an inclusion of minorities - and most of the main characters and acting agents of the plot are women. Granted, most of them were murderous, but still, if McDowell's aim was to create an alternative society that thrived on differences, this worked incredibly well.

Gilded Needles was published in 1980. When reading, I could not help thinking the McDowell was not only writing about 1882, but also about his observations about society at the time of writing. There are descriptions of political scheming that could have easily been set in any modern decade, as could the observation how the legal system may not in fact offer equal protection to all members of society, and let's not even go into the treatment of minorities by society.

Anyway, there was a lot more to this book than a crazed gang of villainous women going on a killing spree to satisfy their feelings of revenge. But of course, one could also enjoy the book just with that plot alone. If not, why do we find The Godfather so gripping?

As I don't generally like horror (readers of my posts may have noticed), I've been trying to figure out what it is about this book that drew me in so much. All I can come up with is that McDowell was an author who really understood the art of writing: His characters are spot on, his scenes are dripping with atmosphere, we get this narration that just shows us everything that is going on without telling us how to feel about it:

In the drugstore, which was neither larger nor brighter nor appreciably cleaner than Lena Shanks's pawnshop, three fat, gaudy whores, whose vermilion lay half a dollar deep upon their cheeks, huddled at a small low table, on which stood three large glasses of absinthe. There was a short candle jammed in the mouth of a bottle and its guttering flame shining through the liquid in their glasses cast green shadows onto their pallid, pudgy hands.

Their gossip hushed when Maggie entered and they watched her closely and with evident mistrust. The shop was run by a young man whose hair had fallen out, whose skin was scarred with the smallpox, and whose eyes worked at cross purposes.

"Yes, ma'am," he said slyly to Maggie, "what can I get for you?"

"Powdered opiate," replied Maggie. "Three ounces."
"Twelve dollars," the druggist replied and, plucking out of a little wooden box his one- and two-ounce weights, dropped them onto one side of his scales. Then from a large jar filled with white powder he measured the opium, slipped it into a pink envelope, and slid it across the counter to Maggie.
"Can't sleep?" he inquired in an oily voice. "Bad dreams? Pain in the tooth?" Mischievously he had listed the common lies of the addict.

John says

Great story that's very different for this author. It's fictional history with horrors that are 100% believable, but not really Horror.

The Audible version, at times, sounds like the old show "The Untouchables" because of the narrator's voice, but he does decent voices. There are a LOT of characters and things to think about, so while you're thinking about one thing you might lose track and need to hit the "Back 30" button. lol

Great, great story!

Kimberly says

4.5 stars!

GILDED NEEDLES, by Michael McDowell is another tale rich in atmosphere that has been re-released by Valancourt Books. I quickly became a McDowell fan after reading some of his supernatural-themed titles. In Gilded Needles, he takes a much different approach. We are presented with an elaborately vivid tale of two vastly different families living in New York.

The Shanks family, headed by matriarch Black Lena Shanks, live in the "wicked", poor area known as the Black Triangle. They have amassed a great deal of wealth (secreted away) by performing illegal abortions, trading in stolen goods, forgery....even the youngest twins are adept at pick-pocketing!

The Stallworths, on the other hand, represent the high class society. They are headed by the merciless Judge Stallworth. The collision of these two very different clans begins years before, when Judge Stallworth sentences Lena to jail, her husband to death by hanging, and their children taken away.

When our story of historic revenge begins, the Stallworths are once again threatening the livelihood of the Shanks--only this time, Black Lena has not forgotten the past incidents, nor will she ignore the current ones.

McDowell weaves his words with an artist's precision. From the opulent property of the elite, to the opium dens and thieving corners of the lesser classes, his descriptions paint a vivid picture of life during this stage of history. The differences between the classes of people are drawn with a stark, unrelenting line. Also, the ruthlessness of both families is simply stunning due to the unbridled animosity of the two clans. The depths to which they sink to get back at each other are boundless!

Another masterful tale from Michael McDowell that will leave you thinking about his characters for quite

some time afterwards.

Highly recommended!

Stephen says

Gilded, Needles

I thoroughly enjoyed this story. It had me guessing what would happen next. It was a fun twisted revenge story.

Kimberly says

*re-read 9/2016: rounding up to 5 stars!

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Another masterful tale from Michael McDowell that will leave you thinking about his characters for quite some time afterwards.

Highly recommended!

Matthew says

Gilded Needles is both twisted and entertaining and I loved reading every page of it. McDowell does a really good job of making you truly hate and despise certain characters throughout the story and that just makes the vengeance visited upon them even sweeter. The descriptions of the Black Triangle really left me with a bad taste in my mouth (the taste of stale beer mixed with the smell of an outhouse to be exact). For whatever reason I enjoyed feeling like I was thrown into this disgusting part of late 19th century ghetto life in NYC. Gilded Needles doesn't contain any supernatural elements, but the evil antihero Lena Shanks and her female gang seem to possess an uncanny ability to wreak vengeance upon the Stallworths. The silent smokey opium dens had the feel of something out of a sci/horror movie. The dreaming inhabitants there could have easily been mistaken for bodies left in cryonic suspension. Very creepy indeed. Read this book as soon as possible.

Jon Recluse says

A dark historical thriller set in the infamous Black Triangle of 1880s New York, where crime is rampant, every vice is available for a price, and even the law can be bought. When a "crusading" judge declares war on an all female criminal empire by sentencing three of its members to death, his entire family receives invitations to their own funerals in the opening salvo of a campaign of revenge and terror from the "queen" of the Black Triangle.....Black Lena Shanks.

And Hell hath no fury....

McDowell captures the time period with historical precision. His descriptions of life in the Black Triangle.....the poverty, despair and horror of simply existing leave sooty fingerprints on your heart, and casts long shadows across your dreams, as he weaves his tale of purely human evil unleashed by a political publicity stunt gone horribly wrong.

An incredible work of dark historical fiction.

Highly recommended.

Kudos to Valancourt Books for bringing this, and many other, lost classics of dark fiction back into print.

Tom Mathews says

It may seem counterintuitive but some of the best horror I've read has no supernatural elements in it at all. Michael McDowell's Gilded Needles is just such a book. The Alabama native applied his mastery of the Southern Gothic genre with all of its genteel depravity, racism political machination and wretched poverty, and applied it to the most unlikely setting, Manhattan.

Set in the New York City in 1882, it is an eminently believable story of hatred and revenge pitting two families, the staid and respectable Stallworths of Grammercy Park and the Shankses, a matriarchal clan living in Dickensian squalor in the tenements of the notorious Black Triangle district. In setting out to

cleanse the city of corruption, Judge James Stallworth sets his sights on what he sees as a family of criminal masterminds, unwittingly setting off a chilling campaign of revenge that threatens to destroy all that he has worked so hard to create. The result is a fascinating and ultimately horrifying tale made all the more frightening for its lack of imaginary monsters.

Horror is a difficult genre to write. The author must have an instinct for just what it is that makes the hair stand up on the back of the neck. He also needs to know how to pace the plot in order to maintain the highest possible level of tension all the way through to the end. Nothing can kill a reader's buzz faster than a horror novel with an intriguing premise that falls flat at the finish. This is the third McDowell book that I have read and he hasn't let me down yet.

I first read *The Elementals* a couple years back and was totally enthralled and shortly after led a group reading of *Cold Moon Over Babylon*. It wasn't until recently that I learned that his was the pen behind such classic movies as *Beetlejuice* and *Nightmare Before Christmas*. He also wrote episodes for many anthology series such as *Tales from the Darkside*, *Amazing Stories*, *Tales from the Crypt*, and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. In short, McDowell played a significant role in shaping my love of dark fiction. In the golden age of horror, few authors could tap into that glorious creepiness that is Southern Gothic as well as McDowell. His passing at age 49 was a severe blow to the genre.

I would like to thank R.C. Bray for his excellent narration of this wonderful book and the fine folks at Valancourt Books who gave me the opportunity to read and review this book. If they ever need another book reviewed, they need only ask.

*The review was based on an Audible audiorecording obtained at no cost from the publisher in exchange for an unbiased review. While this does take any 'not worth what I paid for it' statements out of my review, it otherwise has no impact on the content of my review.

FYI: On a 5-point scale I assign stars based on my assessment of what the book needs in the way of improvements:

*5 Stars – Nothing at all. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

*4 Stars – It could stand for a few tweaks here and there but it's pretty good as it is.

*3 Stars – A solid C grade. Some serious rewriting would be needed in order for this book to be considered great or memorable.

*2 Stars – This book needs a lot of work. A good start would be to change the plot, the character development, the writing style and the ending.

*1 Star – The only thing that would improve this book is a good bonfire.

Char says

4.5 stars!

This book was SO MUCH fun! Set in the early 1880's in the city of New York in a district called The Black Triangle, (where crime runs rampant and poverty reigns), McDowell brings the city and this district vividly to life. Abortions, prostitution and gambling are just a few of the dark deeds that are common here.

Black Lena Shanks and family run their all female criminal empire here without interference from police or anyone else. That is until the *The Tribune* decides to run a series of articles about the Triangle in a supposed

effort to clean up the district. (Said effort being mostly a publicity stunt designed to better the Stallworth family's standing in the community.)

At the heart of it, this is a tale of revenge. Black Lena Shanks runs her small empire in the Triangle until Judge Stallworth sentences 3 members of her "family" to death. From that point on, Black Lena is set on seeking revenge. When the Stallworth family members each receive an engraved invitation to their own funeral, the diabolical plans of Black Lena are slowly unveiled and woe to anyone that gets in her way.

Mr. McDowell's descriptions of the poverty and living conditions in the Black Triangle were harsh and unflinching. There's nothing supernatural going on in this book, as there is in so many other McDowell stories. The horrors here are all too human. I thought I would miss that supernatural element, but I didn't. In fact, I think this book shines as yet another example of McDowell's understanding of human nature. His observations are always spot on-sometimes cutting, sometimes humorous, but **always** witty and true. I found these observations even more entertaining than the supernatural stuff that McDowell did so well.

I have come to adore this author over the last year or so. It's easy to see why he was so popular among horror lovers in his day and I think it's easy for new fans like me to fall in love with his work now. He's written screenplays for popular movies, (Beetlejuice, The Nightmare Before Christmas), and those movies **were** great, but for me it's his novels that speak the loudest. His style, his descriptions, his observations-those are the things that make McDowell one of the greatest horror writers of his time, and even in this time. Maybe even of ALL time. I'm happy to debate the subject with you.

This revenge novel was excellent and I give it my highest recommendation!

Nate says

Gilded Needles is a sublime novel of revenge by Michael McDowell.

I'm not typically fond of stories set in New York City in the 19th century, although there are a few exceptions. I can gladly say that Gilded Needles is most certainly an exception, as by the time I was around 40% through this book (both ebook and audio), I could not stop reading.

An amazing, in depth analysis of life in New York City in 1882, McDowell pulls no punches in analysis of the Black Triangle neighborhood and those that would change it. From the intense depictions of squalor, to the detailed enumeration of fencing practices, to the juxtaposition of the self-righteous, pompous Judge Stallworth and Black Lena (the dark heroine of this tale), McDowell leaves nothing to chance and lays it all out.

Another amazing read, and RC Bray is again excellent in narration of a Valancourt production. I relied more heavily on the ebook to get things started as a plethora of characters are introduced, but once I had a handle on the ensemble cast, the audio was pure gold. High quality production as is now expected from Valancourt, and Bray's typical excellence create an atmosphere perfectly suited to this gritty yet linguistically refined read.

While not McDowell's typical fare as this is not a tale of the supernatural, the horror of humanity is here, and well worth reading for any of his fans.

Bill says

Listened to this one on audio and dug it. The narrator did a great job. It was a little slow going in the beginning but found its groove in the later chapters.

Written very well, this one is pretty dark and the language reminded me bit of John Connolly's Matthew Corbett's series. That's a good thing, btw.

Don't be messin' with the Shanks family. Lessens you want to get a party invite with your name on it. You don't want that. Seriously.

Andi Rawson says

4.5 stars.

Another great read from Michael McDowell. Gilded Needles is set in New York City in the late 1800's. For those who aren't familiar with McDowell's writing, his often formally written prose is laced with both subtle humor and outright wit. Although I felt that a few parts of the book could have been shorter, the story itself is captivating and well-paced.

The Stallworth's are a wealthy family living in one of New York's wealthier neighborhoods. The Shanks' are a family of criminals living in the slums of the city in what is known to the affluent as The Black Triangle. Their paths first cross when Judge James Stallworth sentences Black Lena's husband to death, her to jail, and tries to put her children in foster care. In the time after Lena gets out of jail, she manages to put what's left of her family back together. The Stallworth's are just a bitter taste of her past until Duncan Phair (Stallworth's son-in-law) and the local paper, The Tribune, decide to target the Shanks' in their witch hunt of The Black Triangle. The Stallworth family is about to find out the meaning of the paraphrase from William Congreve: "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

I enjoyed Gilded Needles as much (if not more...) as Katie, the first novel I read by Michael McDowell. McDowell possessed what many modern-day horror writers lack: the ability to write a gut wrenching tale of horror without relying solely on gratuitous gore or recycled plot lines. His stories are original and proof that human beings can be much scarier creatures than the monsters we were taught to fear.

I received this e-book from Valancourt Books in exchange for an honest review. Although it did not affect my opinion of this book, I give much thanks to Valancourt Books for bringing back such brilliant horror classics as this one and for giving them the attention that they deserve.
