

The Compact



by
Charlie Raven

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It is 1898, the London of Sherlock Holmes. Harriet Day becomes increasingly anxious about the influence of the powerful, unpredictable Minerva Atwell on her dearest friend, Alexandra. Her research reveals disquieting inconsistencies in Minerva's life story. At the same time, the gentle enigmatic actor, George Arden, is forced to flee for his life. Harriet appeals for help to a somewhat-unwilling Dr Watson, whose solo efforts are aided (and sometimes hindered) by a forceful young man by the name of Aleister Crowley - and his flamboyant lover, Jerome Pollitt. This is an LGBTQ mystery with a touch of Magick.

The Compact Details

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From Reader Review The Compact for online ebook

Narrelle says

Late last year I read and thoroughly enjoyed *A Case of Domestic Pilfering* by Rohase Piercy and Charlie Raven. That book had originally been written by Raven then reworked by Rohase.

Raven's style is clear in her solo effort *The Compact*, set in London and England of 1898 – a paranormal queer adventure where real people meet fictional ones and detection meets ghosts.

The action revolves around two extremely close friends, widows Harriet Day, who teaches piano, and artist Alexandra Roberts. The lifelong friends share an undercurrent of romantic attachment, but their lives are about to be turned inside out. First, Alex falls under the unhealthy influence of the wealthy Minerva Atwell, whom she has been commissioned to paint. Then one of Alex's boarders dies in a horrible accident.

Their lives are entangled with Roberts' boarders, including the unpleasant Albert Burroughs, and the childlike and ethereal George Arden. George is fey and vague and sees ghosts. He's also falsely accused of murder by Burroughs.

Real life figures Aleister Crowley, occultist and magician, and his lover, poet and female impersonator Jerome Pollitt, become involved with George's situation, as does Dr John Watson, who is recovering from illness while Sherlock Holmes pursues a case in Russia.

It's a large cast which Raven deftly handles with charm, elegance and excellent pacing. The story has plenty of humour as well as creeping dread, while the story slow-builds towards the discovery of grisly crimes, horrible secrets, Atwell's disturbing schemes and George's strange history.

Dr Watson's efforts to be a detective in his friend's absence are naturally not as brilliant as Holmes's, though he does his best in partnership with the brilliant, unpredictable, substance-abusing Aleister Crowley. The comparisons he (and the reader) makes between Holmes and Crowley are inevitable and entertaining.

Watson is only a small player in the tale, however, which focuses on Harriet trying to discover Minerva Atwell's power and clear George Arden's name. She and Alex are both strong characters, as is Minerva and all her mystery. Crowley and Pollitt are lively, too, as are all the supporting cast.

The action reaches its climax of mystic threats, ancient Sumerian tablets, the unquiet dead and deadly intent at Minerva Atwell's creepy spa in the country.

Raven's prose is lively, her period detail light and evocative, and even the most minor of her cast of characters is distinct and fresh. She's also made me keen to read more of and by Aleister Crowley!

The Compact is engaging good fun. After enjoying *A Case of Domestic Pilfering* so much too, I'm hoping I won't have to wait too long for some more from Charlie Raven.

Evadare Volney says

I enjoyed this book immensely - just as much as I liked *A Case of Domestic Pilfering*, if not even more. Raven writes delightfully about a class-varied cast of fin-de-siecle types, and weaves a complex and compelling story about a murder and a sinister businesswoman that includes both mundane and paranormal elements. Much of the tension and emotional momentum is fueled by something we don't see very often - a love triangle of sorts between three middle-aged women. Around them are a supporting cast of theatricals, decadents, some honest police and some crooked ones, quick-eyed servants, and people damaged and deprived by the Victorian closet.

A good mix of well-loved other folks' characters combined with fascinating real historical figures is something I always enjoy: sheer genius that the mystery deduction here is driven by Dr. Watson (a little bit lost since Holmes has gone to the continent without him) finding a passable substitute in a young, callow Aleister Crowley (who is much better suited than Holmes would have been to take on the occult aspects of the case - and his mountaineering skills also come into play at the terrifying climax). Crowley's rocky relationship with Jerome Pollitt gets a lot of exploration and is beautifully handled - as superficial as he sometimes seems, Pollitt is sympathetic in his frustrated love. Pollitt's friendship with the tragic Aubrey Beardsley is also alluded to.

I loved the atmosphere of this - the rooming houses of London, the Gothic landscape of Minerva Atwell's creepy health spa. I loved the characters and their relationships; I loved the organic motivations rooted in fear of aging, fear of loss, fear of discovery; I loved a mostly mature cast who have loved and lost before; I love ethereal George's visions-cum-past-life-memories. I quibble just a little with the pacing - first part felt slow and second half rushed - but that is a minor flaw among so many things it does right.

Rohase Piercy says

It's a pleasure to review this belter of a novel from fellow author Charlie Raven - one of those stories that makes you want to go back to the beginning and read it again as soon as you've finished! It starts out with two nice, middle-aged widowed ladies living in London in 1898, one of whom teaches piano while the other lets rooms to 'theatrical types' and paints portraits, gently reminiscing about their youthful romance whilst dealing with bumps-in-the-night-attic and a demanding, wealthy new sitter respectively – and then develops into a white-knuckle ride involving murder, blackmail, grave-robbing, the sinister effects of a new beauty product, occult rituals and the ancient elemental forces that hold sway at the Adsullata Spa Hotel, Whitstanwell, Nr Bath. Well, what can you expect once a young Aleister Crowley gets involved? He and his flamboyant (real-life) lover Jerome Pollitt soon have cause to regret their association with theatrical agent Valentine Cabot and his enigmatic, vulnerable, fey young protegee George Arden; and a certain Dr John H Watson, left twiddling his thumbs in his famous friend's absence on Government business, gets dragged into the whole sorry affair by a series of co-incidences, misunderstandings and importunate would-be clients turning up at his rooms in 221B. The reluctant partnership between Watson and Crowley, forced to work together to untangle an increasingly bizarre web of subterfuge and malicious intent, works surprisingly well; and there's an informative appendix at the end regarding the historical characters and events worked into the narrative. Two caveats: if you're not familiar with the Sumerian myth 'The Descent of Inanna' (later appropriated by Akkadian culture as 'The Descent of Ishtar'), it might be worth genning up a bit - though its structure and purpose is revealed as the story unfolds and the notes in the Appendix contain a useful link; and before anyone else points it out, yes, with a few possible exceptions Everyone is Gay. Wonderful stuff! I must add that the dialogue, language and period detail are spot on for the 1890s - not always the case in a historical novel. Thoroughly recommended.

