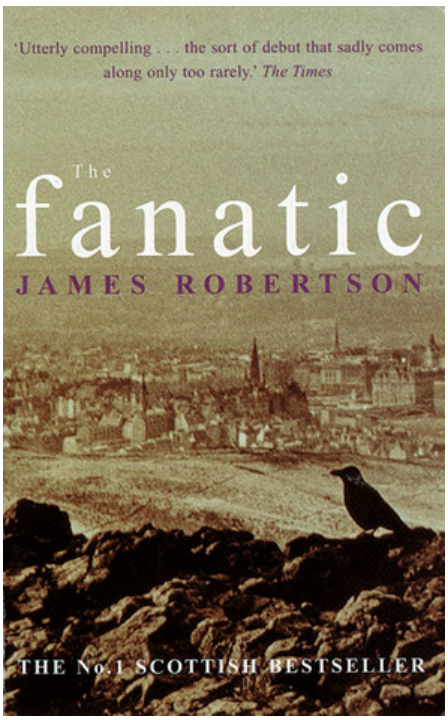

The Fanatic

James Robertson

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An impressive debut from an exciting new Scottish voice – a stunning novel about history, identity and redemption. A no. 2 best-seller in Scotland.

It is Spring 1997 and Hugh Hardie needs a ghost for his Tours of Old Edinburgh. Andrew Carlin is the perfect candidate. So, with cape, stick and a plastic rat, Carlin is paid to pretend to be the spirit of Colonel Weir and to scare the tourists. But who is Colonel Weir, executed for witchcraft in 1670.

In his research, Carlin is drawn into the past, in particular to James Mitchel, the fanatic and co-congregationist of Weir's, who was tried in 1676 for the attempted assassination of the Archbishop of St Andrews, James Sharp.

Through the story of two moments in history, *The Fanatic* is an extraordinary history of Scotland. It is also the story of betrayals, witch hunts, Puritan exiles, stolen meetings, lost memories, smuggled journeys and talking mirrors which will confirm James Robertson as a distinctive and original Scottish writer.

The Fanatic Details

Date	:	Published April 2nd 2001 by Fourth Estate (first published February 28th 2001)
ISBN	:	9781841151892
Author	:	James Robertson
Format	:	Paperback 320 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Cultural, Scotland, Historical, Historical Fiction

From Reader Review The Fanatic for online ebook

Ken Muir says

I was so glad this wasn't the first James Robertson novel I'd read. I came to this one after having read many of his others (*Gideon Mack, And The Land Lay Still, The Professor Of Truth* etc) which I thought were all really excellent. I'm not sure I would have persevered with this book or even moved on to the others if I had started with this as my introduction to him.

Looking back from the benefit of the later, more developed, tales, this is definitely a first novel. It's not as well formed or constructed as his others. His story-telling ability, the capacity to convey his thoughts to the reader, has acquired greater skill over the years. And yet, you can see the basis of James Robertson, the wonderful, relevant, elegant novelist of today in this book.

One of the elements of this book that I least liked, and which I know Robertson is very enthusiastic about, is the use of uniquely Scottish words and expressions in his characters' dialogues. Robertson is a keen supporter of the Scots language and takes part in public bodies whose roles are the enduring maintenance of its place in present-day use. In this case, despite being a Scot myself, I found it came between me and the story and obscured certain parts. This was exacerbated by the story being split between the 1990s and the latter part of the 17th century, with all the historical language artefacts the latter section introduced on its own. I felt that this Scots language issue was much better handled in his later book, *Joseph Knight*.

The alternate telling of two tales, separated in time, but linked by a common character, was also not as well handled as he has achieved elsewhere.

I hope I am not being unnecessarily critical of these areas, but having seen how well James Robertson has progressed, and having had him established as one of my favourite authors, I couldn't contain a little disappointment at this book. It's ridiculous to criticise an author for improving and developing and going on to greater strengths but, as I said, I'm glad this wasn't the first one I read.

John says

A clever novel which drips Scottishness. Set in 1997 and the mid 17th century it twists between the 2 periods. This ploy is quite effective and provides some relief to the prevailing gloom of each period, especially the earlier one.

The two main characters are James Mitchell a 17th century extreme protestant fanatic and Andrew Carlin a history graduate but primarily a loner and an outsider who, like Mitchell, is not given to compromise. The term, and title of the book, equally applies to both of them.

The time spent by the reader in the 17th century is predominantly in Edinburgh and religious turmoil/warfare within its protestant community. We experience senseless and merciless barbarity and witness corruption, cruel injustice inflicted by the state against the weaker members of society, particularly those who do not conform to society’s mores. Andrew Carlin would almost certainly have perished had he lived in the earlier period.

As it is the author casts him brilliantly as the ghost of the colourful extremist preacher, Thomas Weir, executed for his rather unconventional lifestyle, to say the least. The ‘ghost’ is paid to appear alongside guided tours of Thomas Weir’s haunts (no apologies for the pun). Carlin acts as something of a medium as he immerses himself in reading about James Mitchell and his contemporaries. Sometimes the 2 characters almost seem to merge.

Andrew Carlin witnesses in 1997 the fall of the Tories who have been in power for almost 2 decades and witnesses general rejoicing north of the border as a consequence.

If evidence is needed of the separateness of Englishness and Scottishness it is here in plenty and it is hard to see Scotland as other than a separate state to the rest of the UK. A debut novel for James Robertson I believe and a good one.

NB It's written in Scots dialect and therefore not the easiest of reads for me. Most of the historical characters existed and I assume conformed broadly to the author's casting of them.

Rob says

A good warm up for the author's majestic *And the Land Lay Still* , this is an entertaining book where the action switches back and forth between the 1990s and the seventeenth century, a period when Scotland was beset by religious extremism and violence. I read this on a visit to the city in which it's set and a group of burly, suited middle aged men with Heart of Midlothian ties and wives wearing poppy print dresses for Remembrance Sunday in the city's Oxford Bar struck me as probable descendants of the hellfire preachers of the volume. The narrative does fizzle out a little as too much is signposted too early while the central figure in the modern narrative - a loner called Carlin - is only sketchily drawn save for a couple of gripping back stories. Robertson is always an author worth turning to

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Julia says

2.5
This book was determined to be a Great Scottish Novel. I wasn't feeling it and got stressed out that I wasn't respecting Scotland. This book was determined to keep Scots alive, but as an outlander who's reasonably familiar with Scots the way people spoke didn't feel genuine, which put me off and then I got stressed out that I wasn't respecting Scots. It has good moments but in the end, it wound up feeling too much like homework to properly enjoy.

Christian Schwoerke says

This not overlong novel is packed with incident, much of it allusively historical, and much of it is of a hallucinatory nature, imaginings of people and incidents from the Restoration. This novel's matter can by no means easily be unpacked; the stories intertwine, with reality (the underlying narrative), historical account (library books and clairvoyant sympathy), and dreams (appearing as reality) all mingling. What is real and what is spectral fantasy—with regard to the historical account of the condemned Covenanter fanatic James Mitchell—is never clear. There is a sympathy and correlation between his plight and contemporary

Edinburgh slacker Andrew Carlin, but there is also what seems a disproportion in the comparison, as Carlin's indecisiveness, odd jobs, and garrett-flat existence are being set against James Mitchell's brutal torture and imprisonment for an attempted assassination, which failure serves to test and ultimately define his faith. In Carlin's vision of Mitchell's final moments, the condemned Covenanter composes several copies of a death speech (so that even if his words are not heard, they may be read) and he sings psalms from his childhood and he is consoled. In like fashion, facing the world after his tempestuous and wasting illness, Carlin consoles himself in a cheerful but mindless immersion in a video arcade game.

Underlying much of what is happening is the premise of a ghost story, of supernatural and spiritual matters that are re-enacted nightly. The novel, cunningly, makes itself out to be such an entertaining re-enactment, with characters, incidents, and other facts altered and re-arranged to give the audience most delight. Much of this novel's artful re-enactment is in the unpacking of the details of the stories! First this, then that, then some of this, then that... Robertson's craft is complex, and he makes it look a simple matter to mingle these stories of the past and the present, to represent narratives that appear to be incidents out of history and dreams that appears to be history. There is a mingling of tones, of the grave and the trivial and the antic. And then there are the literary fluourishes, the many internal idiosyncratic voices for a number of characters which in no wise jar (though I did wonder at Lizzie's account, about her happy marriage to Mitchell, marred only by his greater devotion to his relation with God).

The historical story of James Mitchell (and to a lesser extent Major Thomas Weir) is set within an especially rich context, that of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms (ie, English Civil War) and the early Restoration. Ignorant of the extent to which Scotland was involved in the Civil War and how the Scottish Presbyterian Covenanter movement played such a significant role, I did some additional reading. Robertson does not oblige the reader to scurry to a history book for background, but it's clear that readers in the UK will more easily envision the colorful historic stage on which Mitchell's life is played. Orphan James Mitchell is taken under the wing of a Presbyterian minister shortly after seeing traitor Montrose's Irish soldiers executed. After University, Mitchell falters as a tutor, is implicated in forbidden Covenanter activity, hides out in Amersterdam, attempts an assassination, marries while on the lam for five years, is caught and imprisoned for two years, tortured then imprisoned for another two years, then brought to trial and executed. A mysterious "Secret Book" of John Lauder, Mitchell's contemporary and an Edinburgh lawyer reveals other details about Mitchell: how before Major Weir and his sister were executed, Mitchell had occasion to visit them in prison, each separately, just before their deaths. An aspect of Mitchell's crisis of faith is the trust, love, and confidence he'd had in Major Weir, who suddenly began to confess that he'd long been a monster, that his belief in his grace had made sacred his most abominable actions (including incest and bestiality).

Set up against Mitchell is Andrew Carlin, mid-30-ish slacker, indecisive about his present, past, and future. He is burdened by an off-putting physical presence; has mixed emotions about his parents, especially his father, who appeared placid but outside his sight were at each other's throats; has recently made himself culpable for the death of a homeless man; and is often conversing with a mirror whose persona is critical and snarky. Carlin is roped into working as the ghost of Major Weir in Hugh Hardie's ghost tour, and because he is uneasy about representing Weir without knowing all the facts, he begins to research Weir and then Mitchell, drawing much information from the "Secret Book" which is supplied to him by an unorthodox librarian. Illness makes Carlin feverishly experience aspects of Mitchell's life, and he even questions whether certain of his own actions had ever occurred, whether he'd even been out of bed. After a long bout, Carlin recites the finals days of Mitchell to a woman who'd been at University with him. He further unburdens himself by disposing of the Major Weir costume (his ghost kit), leaving it for a homeless teenage girl.

The novel's final chapters absent themselves of the historical gravitas of Mitchell and Weir. In the penultimate scenes, there are two comic bits that debunk the past: callow ghost-tour director Hugh Hardie is

doused with a bucket of water by an angry woman who is nightly bothered by the noise of his ghost tour, and the homeless teenager wears the ghost kit Carlin left and strolls from the city centre towards the sunny coast, with each step leeching potency from the old Weir legend and the dark past.

This novel is a superior entertainment, clever and well crafted. Where its power lies is in its ability to hold onto the reader, even after the story has been told, and it's in the recollection that one begins to see how artfully the pieces have been put together.

Heidi says

An interesting look at religion, politics, and the concept of history, how you prove what happened etc. A good story which leaves questions unanswered.

Michele says

I am glad to say that in this last 12 months I have read many of Robertson's books: had I started with this debut I may not have delved into his other delightful books.
He has a wonderful way of drawing you quickly into a tale but in this case I would suggest there seemed too much of a need to incorporate all the painstaking research undertaken. Fascinating though it was, I knew very little of the Covenanters and Presbyterians (unpleasant lot) , it did make for a somewhat difficult read at times as we leapt from long ago to current day, from old to new scots.
I think the concentration repaid the effort but the author has developed a lighter touch as his trade has progressed.

Jim Scobbie says

Ambitious but disjointed - the modern and 17th C stories are linked to no real effect. My struggle was with boredom and lack of empathy with the main character. My struggle was to finish this one, and it was such a disappointment... I really wanted to love it. I might have preferred two separate stories. The history is interesting enough but it's hard to believe that here is yet another book from a modern, talented, author who thinks wrestling with religion is an interesting topic, and portraying maybe-madness is an interesting literary technique.

Marcus Wilson says

A good story that mixes genres up a little with its duel narratives set three hundred years apart. Warning to potential readers though, it is heavy on Scottish dialect, not a massive problem once you get used to it, but I found it quite hard going at first.

Rick says

In 1643, the Scots and the English signed a Solemn League and Covenant to promote Presbyterianism in the two countries and prevent the spread of Catholicism. In 1661, however, after the restoration of Charles II, England passed a law declaring the Covenant illegal. Many Scottish ministers and others, however, did not give up the fight and continued to perform acts that were now considered unlawful.

In James Robertson's novel THE FANATIC (2000), present-day Andrew Carlin is paid to play the ghost of Covenanter Major Thomas Weir—who had been executed in 1670 on the charge of witchcraft—as a means of frightening tourists on a nightly tour of Old Edinburgh. Carlin, an eccentric outsider, is ideally suited for the role.

As Carlin researches the period to discover more about Weir, he is also led to James Mitchel, who in 1668 had attempted to assassinate the hated James Sharp, Archbishop of St. Andrews, and who was finally executed in 1678.

The scene in the novel shifts from the present to the 17th century and back, as Robertson explores both the thoughts and motivations of the Covenanters and those of Andrew Carlin. As it turns out, Carlin is as much a "fanatic" as many of those he has researched, and he finally abandons his job, giving the props he has used to an unknown homeless girl.

This novel is a fascinating read, even for someone who knows relatively little about Scottish history, and I recommend it highly.

Mark says

Anti-social Andrew Carlin takes a job as a ghost in one of Edinburgh's "ghost tours." He takes it too seriously: as he researches the historical figure whose ghost he's supposed to be impersonating, the radical Presbyterian "covenantor" Major Weir, executed in the 1670s for witchcraft and sex crimes, Carlin begins to identify a little too intensely with him. *The Fanatic* is an impressive fictional study of the uses and abuses of history. Caveat lector: some of the narrative and most of the dialogue are in Scots dialect. Though Robertson's writing is quite beautiful and his historical material quite convincing, the novel disappoints in several ways. First, though this may seem childish, there are no ghosts, and we don't really get much sense of the ghost tours and the stories (other than Weir's) they tell tourists. Second, the modern context of late 90s Edinburgh, in which a Scottish Parliament will finally return, gets short shrift. And the two stories of Mitchel (Weir's protege) and Carlin never quite intersect. Is Carlin a modern fanatic? In what way?

Rachel Burton says

Four stars so far. This is a tough read.

It's about history and the concept of history. It's a timeslip novel playing with the idea of history never really leaving the streets on which it happened. It's the story of James Mitchel and fantatic puritan imprisoned in Scotland in 1668 after the Presbyterians were pushed underground again after the return of the British

monarchy and the story of Andrew Carlin, the man who becomes obsessed with the past from the present. And it's the story of how all religion is political and all history two sided.

It's beautifully written but about two thirds of it is written in Scottish dialogue, and half of that in 17th century Scottish dialogue so you really have to keep concentrating and unlike other Scottish dialogue writers such as Irvine Welsh and Anne Donovan (who's plotlines follow the Man Takes Drugs/Has Sex/Becomes Buddhist scenarios) the story is complex and hard to follow anyway, so only read when you have your wits about you!!

UPDATE:- I'm about three quarters of the way through and I have to say I'm finding it quite wearing. The way the story is constructed is excellent but the language makes it read like Chaucer, which whatever you think of Chaucer, is never a good read on a crowded train or in the evening when you're tired! I kind of want to give up, but there are only two books I've never finshed so far so I'm quite determined to continue....

AND ON COMPLETION - All the elements are there. A gripping historical story about witchcraft politics and religion in 17th c Scotland, a parrallel story set in Edinburgh in 1997 around the time of the General Election, gripping descriptions and social commentary. But it was one of the most boring books I've ever read. And I'm quite sad about that.

Luckily his style does get better as I adored Gideon Mack :)

Benplouviez says

Ashamed to say that this is the first Robertson I've read. But what a delightful find. Such an assured writer, handling his different time periods with aplomb, and developing a range of characters who are always interesting, engaging, and sometimes downright weird. Yes, that's a pun. It takes an extraordinary degree of skill and confidence to introduce a whole new character in the last couple of chapters – Karen – and flesh her out, give her a story, and make you care about her, even in the dying pages of the novel. And behind it all lies a serious and considered exploration of Scotland – its history, its culture, and the things that make it both great and troubled. Terrific.

Mark Rice says

James Robertson isn't just an excellent Scottish writer; he's an excellent writer, period. His knowledge of Scottish history is as impressive as his ability to evoke vivid images in the mind's eye of the reader. Having previously read and been amazed by *The Testament of Gideon Mack*, I picked up *The Fanatic* with high hopes. When I read that witchcraft, religious persecution, ghosts, intolerance, bestiality and incest were ingredients in the story, I expected a yarn of Tam O' Shanteresque proportions. The result, however, fell short of that mark.

The story follows Andrew Carlin, who secures a cash-in-hand job on an Edinburgh ghost tour, playing the spectre of Major Weir, an infamous historical figure executed in Edinburgh during the 17th Century for being in league with the Devil, incest with his sister, and bestiality with a variety of animals. As Carlin's research takes him deep into Major Weir's past, they become kindred souls of sorts; both Carlin and Weir have been plagued by personal demons, just as both have been misunderstood, feared, despised and

persecuted. Carlin's consciousness increasingly straddles two eras: one foot planted in the past, one in the present day, but existing fully in neither. His studies and visions uncover a James Mitchel, co-conspirator of Major Weir, and fellow Covenanter. Mitchel's failed assassination attempt on Archbishop James Sharp led to his torture and subsequent imprisonment on Bass Rock, where his mental and physical faculties went into decline. There are parallels between Mitchel's exile on Bass Rock and Carlin's banishment from Scotland after (being falsely accused of) the attemped rape of an underage girl. Indeed, *The Fanatic* is a story of parallels: parallel times in Scottish history; parallel lives of kindred souls; parallels between physical sacrifice and spiritual enlightenment; parallels between historical control by the church and current control by political factions; parallels between medieval fear of witchcraft and devilry, and modern-day fear of repeating history's mistakes; parallels between external and internal demons. I hoped the story's two timelines would join together in a coherent climax, in the way Salman Rushdie's masterful *Midnight's Children* does. Not so. Rather than tying up the loose ends in a beautiful reconciliation, Robertson leaves them flapping in the wind, still disconnected. The moral of the story remains unclear. That said, *The Fanatic* is an enjoyable read and a non-sugar-coated education on Scotland's chequered past with regards to religious persecution and violation of human rights. Perhaps that is the book's only stumbling point: it sticks too rigidly to historical fact, without unleashing Robertson's creative imagination and letting it run riot. I frequently felt that Robertson was holding back his imagination, perhaps in the name of brevity, or perhaps in the interest of historical authenticity.

James Robertson is a stickler for detail. This makes his writing specific and, thus, believable. The book's characters, especially those rooted in historical fact, are well fleshed out. Robertson's language is both beautifully descriptive and unquestionably Scottish. Despite that, I can't help feeling that his best writing is yet to come. If James Robertson learns to let his imagination run amok like the fearless Salman Rushdie or Umberto Eco, we'll be in for a real treat. In the meantime, he's one of the best writers out there and has technical ability in spades.

Bettie? says

The Fanatic by James Robertson is about a young preacher, Maister James Mitchel M.A., who was given the boot by order of the ‘traitor of traitors’, James Sharp. The year is 1677 and he lies in a stinking cell in the prison of Bass Rock off the east coast of Scotland, fifteen miles from Edinburgh.

Skip to Edinburgh 1997 and we have Hugh who is in need of a ghost, one that would appear down a half-lit close at ten o’clock at night and have people jumping out of their skins.

Hew McKail is mentioned (priority pages 96-99 and then dotted around less graphically) and I have no idea just how many ‘great’s go before ‘grandfather’. The title of the book is a fair description.
