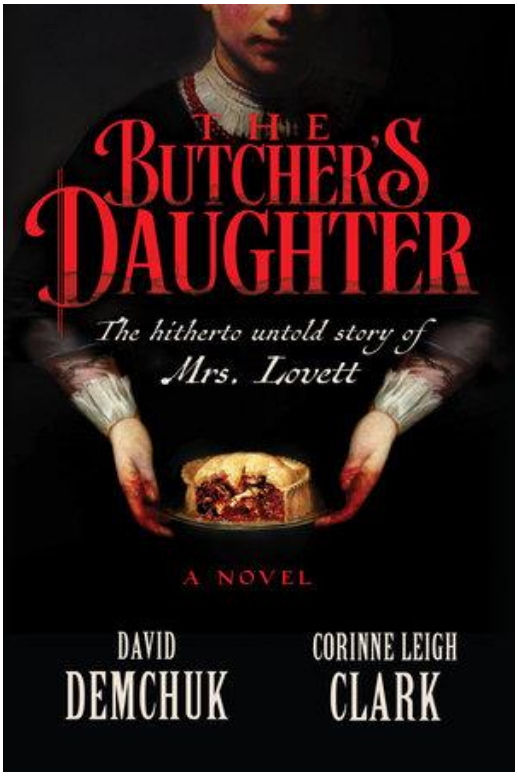

The Butcher's Daughter: The Hitherto Untold Story of Mrs. Lovett

By David Demchuk and Corrine Leigh Clark
Hell's Hundred – Soho Press, NY
2025

432 pp., $36.95 USD (h/c)

Margaret Evans, secluded in St. Ann's Priory, may or may not be the infamous Mrs. Lovett, who used Sweeney Todd's murder victims as filling for Victorian London's most sought-after pies. Emily Gibson, a journalist for the *Daily Post*, in trying to uncover the truth, starts a correspondence with her that is the epistolary basis for David Demchuk and Corrine Leigh Clark's novel *The Butcher's Daughter*.

Shifting the focus away from Todd, the novel demonstrates the access, and restraints, afforded a woman of Evans' class as she moves through London's backstreets and well-appointed parlours. In a world where money, reputation and authority can grant you everything, Evans has nothing. Demchuk and Clark's sprawling Gothic story makes the demon barber of Fleet Street just one among a host of monsters that Evans encounters. Demchuk's previous novels, *The Bone Mother* (2017) and *Red X* (2021), mix the supernatural with the banality of everyday evil, but human viciousness is the focus here. Clark, for her part, was put in touch with Demchuk by their mutual agent so that she could contribute her extraordinary knowledge of life in Victorian London to fuel the horror with a good dose of historical fiction. The mix works, and the two have paired to create a smooth style that doesn't feel cobbled together.

Demchuck and Clark mine the multiple social anxieties around class, industrialisation, and the rise of science and medicine that were features of late nineteenth century London. These tensions emerged in penny dreadfuls like *The String of Pearls* (1846-7, author unknown), the first telling of Todd's murder

spree. They were lurking also in rumours of Spring-Heeled Jack, who attacked primarily women in working-class neighbourhoods. Decades later, Jack-the-Ripper also made women his targets. The medical profession was equally suspect—with medical schools being the customers for Burke and Hare's stolen corpses, and Dr. Victor Frankenstein's horrible attempts to reanimate the dead.

The Butcher's Daughter hands Todd's story, revisited multiple times on stage and screen, to the not entirely reliable Evans, given that she is sharing her story for publication, and knowing that her letters are being censored by the nuns at St. Ann's. The butchers row shop she grew up in is soaked in blood and entrails and Evans is taught to slice through flesh and bone at a young age. Initially wary of Gibson, she unwinds her story slowly: "I doubt you've ever been to the Row. A different world for you. I can see you in a clean grocer shop, picking out a neatly trimmed joint, getting it all wrapped up in paper and tied nicely with a length of string, tucking it under your arm as you step out into the sunshine. No stink, no filth, no vermin, no screams and squeals. You can forget that something's throat was slit to make its flesh your supper (2025, 16)."

Demchuk and Leigh don't allow their readers to forget the vermin and screams, finding ample opportunity to use the misery of grinding poverty as the scaffolding for Margaret's tale. While working in her father's shop, she catches the attention of a wealthy doctor, Dr. C, who appears poised to become her employer and benefactor. When Margaret's father dies suddenly, her mother, unable to maintain the business and barely able to support herself, seizes this tenuous opportunity and delivers Margaret to the doctor. That is the last time she ever sees her.

While Evans is prepared for hard work, events in the household become ever-more sinister. Dr. C's off-limits offices are filled with strange organs, tumors, and fetuses of dubious origin kept in formaldehyde jars. The rest of the staff seem unconcerned by the doctor's activities—bolstered by his freemason ties. The doctor's "scientific curiosity" leads him to experiment endlessly on his wife, whose world is reduced to the room she is shut in and her husband's unchallenged version of her "illness." Eventually, Evans herself is drugged and inseminated in one of Dr. C's rituals. This gruesome series of events twists the medical paternalism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novella *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) into something bloodier and more sinister.

Evans flees the doctor and finds herself pregnant in an upper-class brothel masquerading as a private educational salon. She finds love with one of the women there, but even this brief respite ends, and she is tossed back onto the streets without her child. After Lovett's attempts at extortion lead to his death, she takes over as his 'widow' Margery, baking pies for customers of every

class. Betrayed, exploited, and abandoned repeatedly, by the time she ends up making pies from Sweeney Todd's victims, it is hard to fault her for managing to survive.

Perhaps this novel is teasing contemporary nineteenth century eugenicist beliefs in the innate existence of criminality and evil popularised by theorists such as Francis Galton and Cesare Lombroso. Does Evans use Todd's victims as pie filling because of her fundamentally amoral character or a lifetime of rejection? The novel offers few clues as to the motives of Evans' string of tormentors, who seem driven one-dimensionally by pure evil. We are given no explanation for Dr. C's cruel experiments, other than that his wealth and power allow him to conduct them. Lovett prowls the margins of the story, emerging only to assault or extort. And Todd's insatiable urge to add more bones to the pit behind the pie shop is never satisfactorily explained. The suggested reason rests on an unlikely coincidence—one of a few shoe-horned into the final pages to wrap up a mostly well-paced and engaging story.

With its focus on women's work, and women's spaces, *The Butcher's Daughter* has been lauded as a feminist retelling of Todd's story. Evans is a young, single, working-class woman in a place and time where her options are few. As such, the book recalls Hallie Rubenhold's deeply researched biography *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack* (2019), exploring the pressures that led these immigrant and abandoned women into the Ripper's path. But in this story Margaret can only escape and abide. A feminist tale calls for more ingenuity and triumph, not mere endurance.

— Karen Herland

Karen Herland fell in with a bad crowd with a taste for horror at a young age. She is a director on the Board of the Montréal Monstrum Society and also sits on the *Monstrum* editorial board. She is a lecturer in popular/visual culture and sexuality studies at Concordia University and currently teaches Queer Horror.

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