

Book Review: A Leap in the Dark by Justin Kerr-Smiley

Edinburgh – 1798. The New Town is under construction, In the overcrowded Old Town rich and poor live cheek by jowl. Leith, meanwhile, is a thriving port and it will not be fully unified with Edinburgh until 1920.

David Stoddart is a Leith shipwright and respected town councillor living in Lyons Close. He is also – as are many men like him – a gambler and cockfighter. His out of hours behaviour has become so extreme that he no longer lives with his much loved wife Annabel and their young daughter.

Or at least that's the reason he's given to Annabel. In fact, Stoddart is a thief, a man who spends his days in a waterfront office and his nights housebreaking and stealing. He needs the money to cover his gambling debts, but even if he didn't, he'd still do it; it's an addiction, and like all addicts he has to get his fix.

In **Justin Kerr-Smiley's *A Leap in the Dark*** we follow Stoddart through his nefarious nighttime activities, his working days at Stoddart, McCready and Co, and his visits to Annabel and Cecilia in Warriston's Close. He is a man who loves his family and respects his business partner but is inexorably drawn to danger (today he'd probably drive fast cars or follow tornadoes.) He'd like to resist the urge to take more and more

risks, but he knows he can't,

'He craved it as much as an opium eater did his precious grains.'

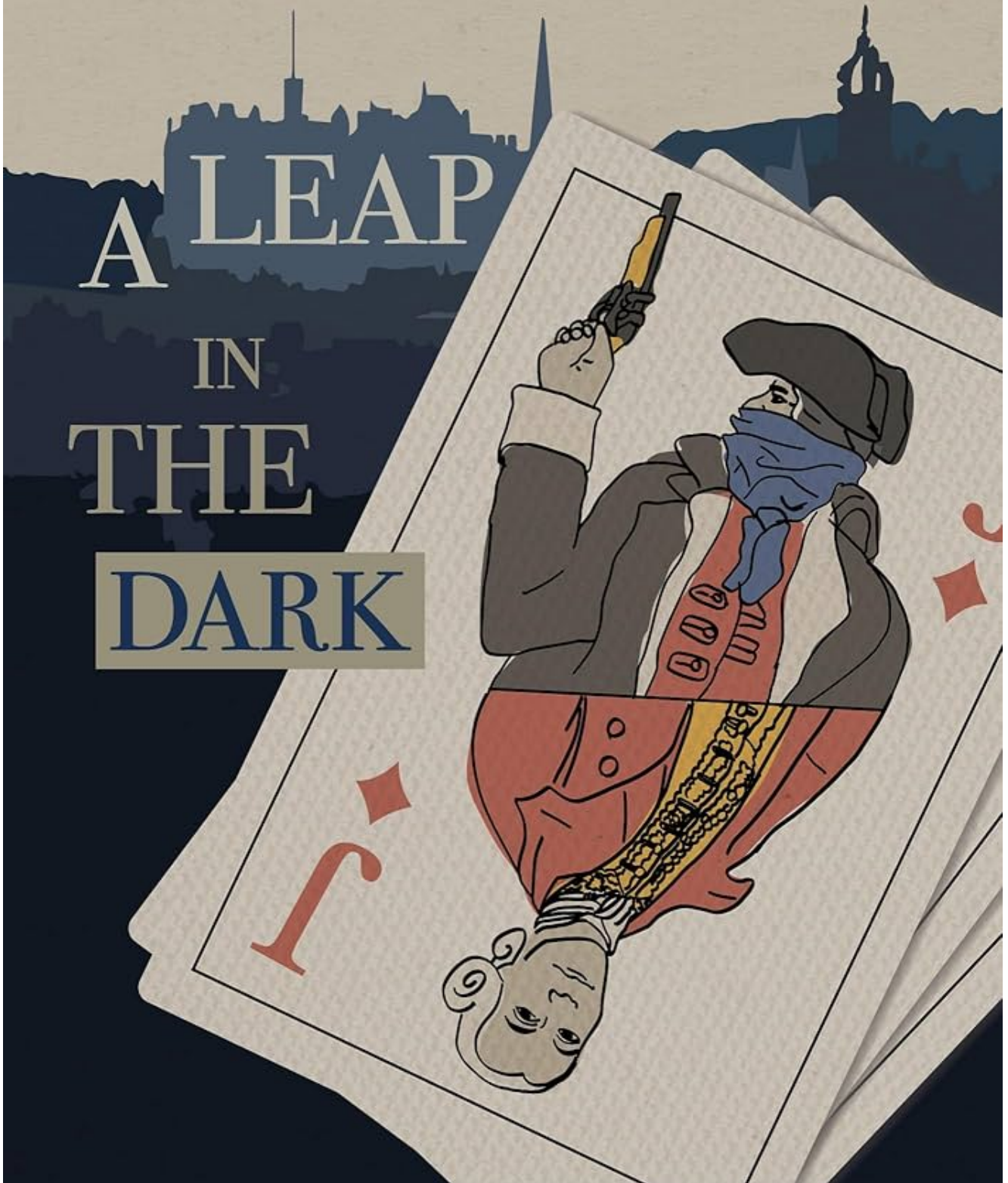
Kerr-Smiley recreates 18th century Edinburgh with skill. We can see Stoddart in his cape, gloves and tricorne hat, walking up the High Street where children run about and hawkers shout their wares. We can smell the stink of the closes. In Leith,

'The streets were grimy and reeked of coal tar and fish.'

We can see the gangs fighting on the dockside, the sex workers looking for trade.

Justin Kerr-Smiley

A LEAP
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A Leap in the Dark is fast paced; having immersed us in

Stoddart's world, Kerr-Smiley wastes no more time – we are thrust headfirst into his story. Stoddart wants to expand his 'business', and by that he doesn't mean building more ships. Soon he's recruited accomplices to join him in the next stage of his thieving. Carpenter Michael Muir, tailor Alec Cuthbertson and escaped convict Stokes may be supporting characters but in Kerr-Smiley's hands they come alive on the page, lock-picker Muir as a reliable sidekick, Cuthbertson as a well-intentioned youth who needs money to support his family, and Jack Stokes as real piece of work – a hardened Cockney murderer and thug who's fled north to avoid transportation. I soon felt I knew each one of them.

Meanwhile we see Stoddart playing the family man. He's completely torn between his obsession with crime and his love for his wife and child, and much as his business partner Samuel McCready irritates him with his strict Calvinist views and his attempts to bring Stoddart into the same devout line, the councillor knows McCready is a good man and has his best interests at heart.

As Stoddart and his band of thieves become ever more ambitious, they plan 'one last heist', the robbery of the General Excise Office at Chessels Buildings. Kerr-Smiley's description of that fateful night had me turning the pages at speed as he ratchets up the tension; we are there with the would-be thieves as Muir picks the locks, as Cuthbertson keeps watch and as Stoddart, outside the hall, sees a vision of his long-dead father. It's a truly exciting episode whose far-reaching consequences will change lives – and not only those of the men themselves.

After such a climax a lesser novel might have floundered, but *A Leap in the Dark* holds our attention to the very last page, as Stoddart flees to Europe only to be brought back to Edinburgh – in chains. Will he face the gallows, or will he be reprieved? The scenes in his prison cell, especially when Annabel visits, are very moving.

David Stoddart is of course modelled on the real 18th century councillor and burglar Deacon (William) Brodie, who also raided the Chessels Court Excise Office (though with a somewhat different outcome.) Yet Kerr-Smiley paints Stoddart as a far more nuanced character than his famous namesake; Stoddart not only lives, as Brodie did, a double life, he is also a highly conflicted character, one who really wants to be good, but simply can't stay away from crime. Like Edinburgh itself he is both respectable and wicked, puritanical and seedy, strong and weak, dark and light. His tragedy is that, just like the city, he can never truly reconcile the two.

A Leap in the Dark is a thrilling story, well told, but it is also a reflection on conflict and choice, on the consequences of the decisions we make and the paths we take, and on what it is to be human in a world full of temptation.

A Leap in the Dark by Justin Kerr-Smiley is published by [Chiselbury Publishing](#).