

## Lovereading Reader reviews of **Bellman & Black** by Diane Setterfield

**Below are the complete reviews, written by Lovereading members.**

### **Angela Rhodes**

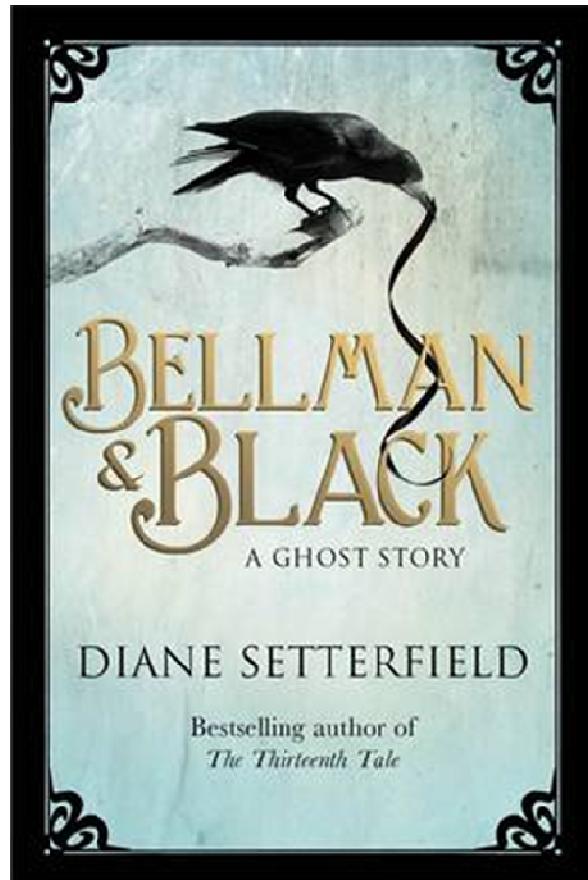
*This is the story of William Bellman, who as a boy of ten years, four days old, with one shot of his homemade catapult, shoots a rook out of a tree. Dianne Setterfield's tale, is a macabre one, one that wraps itself, round you, like a scarf, and soaks into your bones, and mind, like a cold, damp, foggy November day.*

*William becomes, a man of wealth and fortune, with the luck of the gods, smiling on him...until, friends and family, start to die. William, begins to wonder, as at every funeral, he spies, a strange, tall, spindly, man, all dressed, in black, never inside the church, only at the gravesides. One drunked night, a bargain, is made, with the strange, creature, and a shop opens in London, A mourning emporium, Bellman & Black. Dora, William's daughter, becomes, fascinated with rooks, while William begins to hear voices, and singing, from rooms, which are empty, the staff, and customers, say, they only ever see, Mr Black, but not much of Mr Bellman so why can't William, see him.*

***If you want a creepy story, that will haunt you, one perfect, for a cold winters night, then let Dianne Setterfield's book, do it, Take a ride, on the back of a rook, into the world of Bellman & Black.***

### **Jill Peters**

*You cannot help but admire and respect William Bellman. He lived in tough times and experienced life's challenges, those challenges that he could envisage, see and prepare for and those deeply hidden. Those hidden challenges threatening his, and those close to him, very existence in this world. Diane Setterfield takes us through William's life*



*and the disastrous impact one schoolboy prank could have on the rest of his time line.*

***I loved this book. I could not put it down, I needed to know the real identity of Mr Black and why was he in William's life.***

*I learnt so much about the everyday trials of Victorian life facing William Bellman, striving to reach his vision and ambitions for his future success. But most of all, I learnt about the common and garden rook. They are not what they seem to mere human beings. I will watch my back and treat them with the utmost respect in future.*

### **Carolyn Huckfield**

***This is an amazing read. Her first novel was good so I wanted to see where she went from there. She took us to a different place again.*** We see the life of William Bellman. He is a fascinating person, full of energy and enthusiasm but after tragedy strikes he copes by throwing himself into making money. Set in nineteenth England you can almost feel yourself there. The wool mills of the Cotswolds come to life. There is a fatal flaw in the character of Bellman. He never lets emotion or memory into his world. After killing a rook as a child these birds keep cropping up in his life. The mysterious Mr Black appears at funerals but no one else sees him. When his daughter is dying Bellman believes that he makes a deal with Mr Black to save her. However he has got it all wrong? Is Black really a rook who can reach.

### **Vanessa Wild**

***An unusual and disturbing story set in the Victorian era.*** When a young boy by the name of William Bellman kills a rook with his catapult, it sets off a tragic chain of events and a meeting in a graveyard with a mysterious stranger dressed in black.

*As I absolutely loved The Thirteenth Tale by the same author, I was very pleased and excited to be given the opportunity to review Bellman and Black. Although it is beautifully written, carefully told, atmospheric and well researched, I did not enjoy this one as much. I found the descriptions of the inner workings of the mill and the emporium to be quite heavy going and a little dull.*

*However, it was by no means a disaster for me as the pace did pick up quite considerably during the second half of the book. I was more engrossed in the plot and I found myself turning the pages a little quicker to discover what happened next.*

*The characters are quite dark and sombre in line with this atmospheric little tale. I didn't have a favourite, though. It's classed as a ghost story but I would say it is more one of horror and about revenge.*

***I liked the intermittent chapters about the rooks or ravens and their collective terms - I found them intriguing and eerie. I will never look at a rook in the same way again!***

### **Sarah Musk**

**This is a mysterious, dark book.** There is a terrible sense of unease in the first part of the story - everything is going too well for William Bellman - he seems to have been born under a lucky star. Then the deaths start of his nearest and dearest until finally when it becomes almost unbearable, the story switches into an almost manic, dark dimension.

The concept of the story - revenge and retribution - is very interesting but the ending leaves the reader feeling you still don't quite understand what happened to him. It explains a bit but not enough to satisfy one's curiosity which has been relentlessly fed bit by bit throughout the book.

William Bellman is a very sympathetic character - clever, energetic, likeable which makes what happened to him seem even more tragic. You do feel he did not deserve what happened to him - his rash action as a boy destroyed his adult life.

**I would recommend this book but the reader has to work hard to reach some level of understanding at the end of the book. Having said that it did make a strong impression on me - I thought a lot about it afterwards because the descriptive writing was very strong.**

### **JB Johnston**

As a young boy, William Bellman kills a rook with a catapult. Little does William know that this act will have consequences for him far into his future.

Later, William finds fortune and becomes a wealthy business man with a loving family. William appears to be untouchable. However, soon tragedy calls and a mysterious stranger dressed in black appears to be present during every sad event in William's life. When William is in danger of losing his entire family, a business deal is struck with the stranger, although what that deal was, William has trouble remembering. However, William is keen to honour the deal struck between himself and the man in black and soon the thriving business of Bellman and Black is born. Enjoying many more years of success, William is plagued by uncertainty and fear about the deal, and is constantly waiting for Mr Black to make another appearance.

**Bellman and Black is a Victorian Ghost Story. Whilst the book was certainly creepy in places I did not feel that it was a frightening story. However, there was always an undercurrent of something lurking in the background and the reader is left to feel how William must have felt, waiting and wondering what, if anything was going to happen to him next.** A good well written story, albeit with a slow pace.

### **Kathy Howell**

*The book begins with William Bellman using his catapult to kill a rook. He is playing with friends from his village when this happens and it is this action that will shape his future. The story describes the comfortable, successful life he leads. However, the death of an old school friend who was with William on the day the rook was killed starts a chain of events that will shake his life. At a series of funerals William sees a man in black and this man begins to haunt him. William's daughter finds a picture of a rook which she keeps under her bed and from then on misfortune seems to dog William's family. William starts a business to cater for every aspect of mourning which he decides to call Bellman and Black. The business is very successful but the arrival of "Mr Black" makes William reflect on his life.*

*There are also small sections about rooks and collective nouns for rooks which are very well integrated with the story.*

**I enjoyed this book and will look for others by this author.**

### **Josie Barton**

*When I first started Bellman and Black, I thought that it was a rather unassuming book as nothing much seems to happen for a good third of the novel. However, there is a stealthy quietness to the story which sneaks up on you, and as the morbid fascination for the ritual of death starts to evolve, the sparseness of the narrative becomes more absorbing and offers a disturbing insight into the Victorian fascination for death and dying.*

*With great precision, the author has captured the very essence of Victorian funereal etiquette, from the intense and varied quality of the black bombazine used for mourning clothes, to the voyeuristic observation of unseemly grief. There is an almost hypnotic quality to the story and a distinct creepiness which seeps into your mind. Reading the story late at night you sense a chill in the air, and almost without realising it you start to observe rooks in a whole new light.*

*Diane Setterfield's first book The Thirteenth Tale was a distinct success; however, my feeling is that this one will be a bit of a slow burner, not because the book lacks appeal, but because the brooding nature of the narrative may not be to everyone's taste.*

### **Berwyn Peet**

**A terrific read from a master story teller.**

*What a terrific book. There are many good points - it has a compelling story line, interesting characters, it is atmospheric and disconcerting - and yet what really stands out is the quality of the story-telling.*

*From the beginning when William Blackman, as a ten year old, commits a small cruel deed by killing a rook with his catapult we are swept up into the story of his life. I loved the Victorian setting with details of mills and shops and enjoyed seeing his progress towards being a successful businessman even though all along the reader is made aware that dark things are coming.*

*I enjoyed The Thirteenth Tale and have been looking forward to another book by Diane Setterfield. This certainly doesn't disappoint; **it is one of the best-crafted and most captivating novels I have read this year.** I found it a real page-turner right up to the last line - and what an unsettling last line it is. I just hope we do not have to wait so long for her next book.*

### **Kath Martin**

*I have been waiting for this book, the second by Diane Setterfield, since the moment I turned the final page of "The Thirteenth Tale". It was worth the wait! I read the whole book in two sittings. She tells a good story. I loved it - although I did find I kept picturing William Bellman as Harry Selfridge! **Having thoroughly researched the workings of a mill, Diane has woven her threads into a superb finished article. I just hope it's not too long before she writes another one.***

### **Sue Broom**

***There is much here to enjoy. I loved reading everything she had to say about rooks and their behaviour, the folklore surrounding them and their persisting association with death.***

*There is much here to enjoy. Diane Setterfield writes well. There is a wealth of fascinating detail about the workings of a 19th century woollen mill and about funeral rituals of the age. I loved reading everything she had to say about rooks and their behaviour, the folklore surrounding them and their persisting association with death.*

*Like many of his generation, William Bellman is bereaved many times over. Unlike many others, he represses his grief, throws himself into his work (with great financial success) yet suffers from exhaustion, anxiety and the 'guilt of the survivor' later in life. Despite the author's perceptive portrayal of his character, I struggled to empathise with him.*

*I was intrigued by the plot as described in the blurb but, by the time I had finished the book, was disappointed to have found little more to it than that. My own fault probably but I expected more of a mystery and came away feeling underwhelmed.*

## Lynn Curtis

**Jonathan Strange meets Mr Selfridge in this blacker than black morality/fairy story**, which traces the rise and terrible fall of a young man of promise who thoughtlessly kills a rook... The book's nineteenth-century setting is skilfully evoked as we see hero William Bellman effortlessly acquiring two fortunes, first as a mill owner and then as co-owner of a funeral emporium with 'Mr Black' - the stranger whose occasional appearance in William's life is always heralded by the death of someone close to him. The trajectory of William's disintegration from young man of promise to haunted, haggard purveyor of Victorian mourning goods has its own remorseless logic and rhythm, and certain episodes such as the deaths of his wife and almost all his children have the force of nightmare, but I couldn't help feeling that this book would have been stronger if an element of surprise had been maintained. Because we know all along exactly what William has done to bring his feathered Nemesis upon him, the denouement, for this reader at least, fell a little flat.

## Richard Hamlin

**This is a beautifully written novel, full of vivid description and metaphor; in fact Bellman & Black is, in essence, one great metaphor.** Diane Setterfield takes her reader into the hearts of Victorian Kent and London, capturing perfectly the contrasts and conflicts as technology and industrialisation encroach upon the old and traditional ways of life.

The story charts the life of William Bellman, a driven and tireless epitome of the industry of the new age, who is introduced to the reader as a young boy with guile and tenacity, who fells a lone rook perched in solitude in a tree close to his home. In keeping with the sinister tones of her previous novel *The Thirteenth Tale*, Setterfield casts a shroud of melancholy and darkness over the book and Bellman's enterprise is occasionally threatened by tragedies which give rise to periods of manic paranoia.

The strength of this novel is its powerful description, symbolism and insinuation. Rooks appear ever present, casting watchful eyes over Bellman and then there's Black... or is there? The ending isn't in doubt from the first page, yet the manner of it, and its orchestration and implications make this an absorbing read.

## Lisa Redmond

*It's a number of years since I first read Diane Setterfield's debut *The Thirteenth Tale* and I enjoyed it so much I have recommended it to many others since, friends, family and customers alike, I even listed it in my top five reads of all time which believe me was not an easy list to compile.*

*So of course I jumped at the chance to read an early review copy of her next book 'Bellman & Black' which will be published by Orion this October in time for Halloween.*

*I dived straight in to find a glorious slice of Victoriana layered with gothic suspense and mystery. The story opens with the last dying moments of William Bellman as his life flashes before him. He remembers being a ten year old playing in the cemetery with his friends and firing a stone at a rook with his catapult. He knocks the bird to the ground and instantly feels that he has crossed a line. Death has entered William's young life and it follows him through the years. The image of the rook, of the cemetery of the mourning clothes and all the trappings of the Victorian cult of mourning recur throughout the story and lead William to open an emporium of mourning, the first department store dedicated to funerals; black hats and gloves, coffins, black edged stationary can all be purchased at Bellman & Black. **This novel is a glorious return for a wonderful and talented writer.***

### **Jane Carter**

***Lovely Victorian period details, a wonderful atmosphere, and a feeling of foreboding that never quite goes away.***

*I fell in love with Diane Setterfield's first novel – 'The Thirteenth Tale' – and when a second novel with an intriguing title appeared after a long wait, my expectations soared. Maybe they went too high because, although I found some things to love, in the end I was disappointed.*

*A haunting prologue set the story up beautifully, with events in childhood foreshadowing dark days to come. And then there is a story built on classic lines. A young man rises in the world, applying himself, seizing every opportunity, to achieve his ambitions. But at the pinnacle of his success, tragedy strikes. He tries to rise above it, but he loses sight of what really matters, and that, eventually causes his, downfall. It's a fine story, and Diane Setterfield tells it well, painting such lovely Victorian period details, creating a wonderful atmosphere, and a feeling of foreboding that never quite goes away. And her themes – the growth of industrialisation and the fashion for mourning – are utterly right for the period and fit the story beautifully.*

*But it's such a pity that the plot is stretched and repetitive, that so many characters and relationships are under-developed, and that many interesting ideas, to one side of the main storyline, were left unexplored. I did enjoy reading 'Bellman and Black', but not as much as I had hoped, and I wish it could either have been left as a short story or opened out into a novel with a broader scope.*

*You can follow Jane's blog at: <http://fleurfisher.wordpress.com/>*

## Lindsay Healy

*William Bellman is just past his tenth birthday when he takes aims at a rook with his catapult; despite the seemingly impossible distance, the target is indeed met and the bird struck dead. Though he doesn't dwell on it, this unsettling moment is set to ultimately shape and overshadow William's whole future existence.*

*He works hard and becomes a successful mill owner and happy family man with a lovely wife and children, seemingly very fortunate, but then his world is hit by terrible tragedy and loss. He notices a curious, inscrutable figure appearing in the graveyard, dressed all in black, and interprets that they have made an incredible agreement that will help him retain what still matters to him. As a result, William becomes creator of a shop devoted to everything relating to mourning on a grand scale. William pours himself utterly into his work, suppressing feelings and memories of what has gone before. But he is somehow haunted and can never be rid of his past.*

*The rook is a portent, a symbol throughout the story, always hovering, lurking, lingering, seemingly influencing Bellman's path, and redressing the balance. More about the nature of the rook and its character is revealed in short asides interspersed throughout the novel.*

*I found this a dark, atmospheric and unusual Victorian tale depicting a man's glorious rise and tragic fall; cleverly written and structured, it made me think about the joy and sadness of life. William is hardworking, caring and likeable, yet he is transformed into a shadow of his former self. **The gradual unfolding of events, the shadowy, ghostlike figure of Black and the discovery of Bellman's destiny all rendered this an intriguing, mysterious and compulsive read.***

## Gill Wilmott

**A skilful quirky book, written by someone with a bright unusual imagination, that I really enjoyed reading.** Yet I was disappointed with the ending. The explanation(s) I had looked forward to discovering all through the book were just not there.

*The storyline was written in such a way that, certainly in the first half, one really wanted the characters to continue on happily but there was a clever line of darkness running through it, seemingly initiated by an unfortunate childhood action, sticking to it, like the layer of toffee in a Mars Bar. Very clever. It was informative too, a lot of interesting facts on rooks and the lives of Victorian mill and shop owners, and their employees.*

*The second half however lost some of my sympathy and became somewhat obsessive and at times a little tedious even. There was a sense of inevitable decline and of hurrying to see what was at the bottom of the slope.*

*So when the ending rather let it down there was, for me, a real sense of anti climax . Don't let this put you off the book however, it is still well worth the read and it may be*

*me who is missing something in the conclusion that is perfectly clear to greater mortals!*

### **Teresa Majury**

*'Bellman and Black' will probably be one of my most memorable reads this year but for all the wrong reasons unfortunately. I loved Diane Setterfield's debut, The Thirteenth Tale and have been anxiously awaiting her second novel for seven long, long years.*

*The premise is promising - it's a Victorian tale of love and loss and it focuses on the very Victorian obsession with mourning. It begins with an incident during William Bellman's childhood when he kills a rook with his slingshot - a regrettable mishap which will have long-lasting consequences. William is successful in business, running a mill and later on a mourning emporium but his personal life is dogged with grief and disappointment.*

*Plot-wise, very little happens and this isn't usually a problem for me as I enjoy slow-paced novels. However I waited and waited to be drawn in but never quite got there. At 320 pages, it's not overly long but it became a chore to pick it up and continue reading so it took me 10 days to read a book which I should have devoured in a day or so. Not a good sign! At times it read like the outline of a better book, a black and white sketch waiting for someone to colour it in. It also felt a bit like a novella which had been stretched, kicking and screaming, into a novel.*

***On the positive side, it's well written, you'll learn something about rooks and it captures the Victorians' morbid fascination with death but it left me cold.***