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# Hell and High Water

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

3

The stench of shit and sweat and the presence of whores both feature in this novel's first page description of a typical eighteenth century Devonshire small town market day. Does this mean that Tanya Landman will go on to write with the same searing honesty about past England as she did about post-bellum America in her magnificent Carnegie Prize winning novel [Buffalo Soldier](#) [4]? Not this time, alas, as unconvincing melodrama soon starts creeping in. There is more than a touch of **Poldark** in the night as nefarious plots abound and various escapes are made much against the odds. Fifteen-year-old mixed race Caleb and his close companion Letty finally foil villainous Sir Robert Fairbrother and his rotten trade in scuttling ships and then claiming from under-writers. This nasty gentleman is reminiscent of Thomas Benson, a true life Devonshire aristocrat and major smuggler of the times. But too soon he turns into little more than a stage baddie, only unmasked at the last moment by the appearance of a ring bearing the family seal needed to win the day.

There has always been a tendency to glamorise the past when writing for young readers. And once again, although Caleb is often hungry and has also to put up with constant taunts about his colour, he still leads something of a charmed life. He possesses an ability to recover at speed from any injury and also manages to get by without any obvious food supply once on the run. Letty and her step-mother Anne fare less well, at one stage both only just recovering from serious illness. The brute facts about their daily life in a small, mean-minded fishing village come over more convincingly. Yet too often just as the truth about the nature and extent of past poverty starts to sink in the clarion-call of over-plotted and increasingly unlikely adventure leads this otherwise well written story further astray.

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