

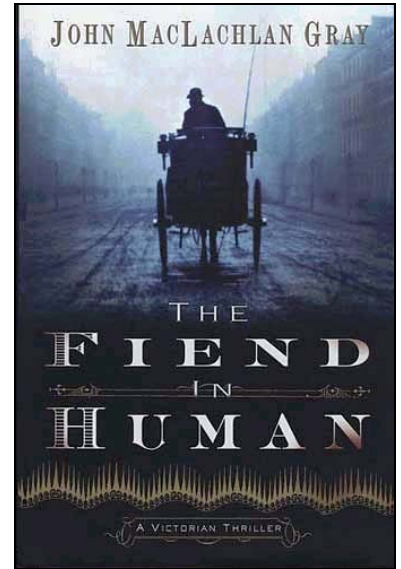
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *The Fiend in Human* by John MacLachlan Gray

St. Martin's Press

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### Introduction to *The Fiend in Human*

It's 1852, and the ranks of the London poor have doubled. In the swollen shadow of the great St. Giles Rookery, fallen women attract the perfumed dandies of the West End into a vicious circle of venality, vanity, and vice.

Edmund Whitty, correspondent for *The Falcon*, the city's second-best sensational tabloid, writes whatever will stimulate the reader, delay his (increasingly physical) creditors, and supply him with the alcohol and opiates required to see him through the day. His most recent triumph was to supply a name for the fiend in human form who has murdered an uncertain number of prostitutes with a white silk scarf: Chokee Bill. Chokee Bill incited a garroting panic that paralyzed the business of London---until the arrest of one William Ryan. Normality has returned. The hangman, Mr. Calcraft, as dusty and dreary as death itself, awaits.

Broke again and in search of crisp copy, Whitty makes a shocking but not altogether surprising discovery: the white-scarf slayings have continued. When he endeavors to find the real Chokee Bill, he is greeted with emphatic hostility on all sides.

This thrilling Dickensian tale offers galvanizing suspense and an evocative and witty vision of life in Victorian London.

## Praise for *The Fiend in Human*

"If you were one of those who made Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* a bestseller, you'll enjoy *The Fiend in Human*."

- *The Charlotte Observer*

"Gray portrays the mean streets and byways of 1852 London with a skill worthy of Dickens."

- *Publishers Weekly*

"Vivid characters, dead-on dialogue, and a galloping good plot make *The Fiend in Human* a tale irresistible."

- Giles Blunt, author of *Forty Words for Sorrow*

"Great fiction--a perfect place, a perfect time, a perfectly intriguing cast of characters, and a perfectly diabolical villain."

- Keith Ablow, author of *Compulsion*

"A wonderfully atmospheric thriller...It is a splendidly dark Victorian world and a novel which is hard to put down."

- *Publishing News*

## Reading Group Guide Questions

1. The author has described *The Fiend in Human* as resembling distressed denim or leather: "something new that looks old." What seems new and what seems old about the themes and the story?
2. What do you think of Edmund Whitty, both as a man and as a reporter? What about Henry Owler? How are the two alike, and how do they differ?
3. Discuss the women and girls in the book. To what extent do the differing social positions of Phoebe, Dorcas, Clara, Mrs. Plant, and Mrs. Marlowe determine their fates? Do their strategies for survival ennoble or degrade them?
4. The title is based upon the phrase, "The Fiend in Human Form"—a phrase sensational journalists used in referring to a murderer. How does the meaning change in its shortened form? Is the "fiend" inhuman, or is he all too human?
5. Did the London environments described in the book seem authentic? On what basis do you think the author selected the details?
6. The author wrote the first draft of the book at a time when Vancouver was reeling over the murders of dozens of prostitutes, with no interest or action from the police. Does knowing this change your understanding of the book in any way?
7. How do the actions and attitudes of the Victorian sensational press compare with those of the media today?

8. The novel, unusually, is written in the present tense. Do you think John Gray's background in the theater influenced his decision to write it this way? How did it affect your experience as a reader—a historical novel, written in the present tense?
9. What kind of humor is evident in *The Fiend in Human*? Where does such humor stem from? What does the humor in the book contribute to your sense of the period?

## About the Author

**John MacLachlan Gray** is a writer-composer-performer for the stage, film, television, radio, and print. He is the recipient of many awards, including the Los Angeles Critics Circle Award for playwriting, a Silver Hugo, and a gold at the New York Film and Television Festival. His musical play *Billy Bishop Goes to War* appeared on Broadway and subsequently became one of the most produced shows in North America. He lives in Vancouver with his personal demons.