Crippen

A Novel of Murder

By John Boyne

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about Crippen are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach Crippen.

About the Book

"Had Charles Dickens been around to turn his talents to fictionalizing the classic Crippen murder case, the result might well have been close to this superb, multifaceted novel."

--Publishers Weekly (starred review)

July 1910: a gruesome discovery has been made at 39 Hilldrop Crescent. Buried in the cellar are the remains of Bella Elmore, former music-hall singer and wife of Dr. Hawley Crippen. But the doctor and his mistress have already disappeared and a full-scale hunt for them has begun. Across the Channel in Antwerp, the SS Montrose begins its two-week voyage to Canada and slipping unnoticed among its passengers is Mr. Robinson and his son Edmund...

With its boldly-sketched characters and unexpected twists, Crippen stands as the exemplary American debut of this acclaimed Irish author.
About the Author

John Boyne was born in Dublin, Ireland. He studied English literature at Trinity College, Dublin, and was a student in creative writing at the University of East Anglia, where he was awarded the Curtis Brown Prize. He began publishing short stories in his early twenties and was shortlisted for a Hennessy Literary Award. He is also the author of the children's novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which has been shortlisted for the Ottakar's Children's Book Prize. He has taught creative writing at the Irish Writer's Centre and at the University of East Anglia, where he was awarded the Writing Fellowship for 2005; in the same year, Ireland's *Sunday Business Post* named him one of the forty people under forty in Ireland "likely to be the movers and shakers who will define the country's culture, politics, style and economics in 2005 and beyond."

*Crippen* was nominated for the *Sunday Independent* Hughes & Hughes Irish Novel of the Year Award. Boyne's work has been translated into fourteen languages. He lives with his partner in Dublin.

Discussion Questions

1. In most novels, the outcome is unknown. Even though you know from the jacket description that a murder takes place, were you still able to anticipate, and enjoy, the unfolding of events? Discuss the narrative structure of the book, as well as its elements of suspense.

2. How did the early chapters about Crippen’s coming-of-age affect your opinion of the would-be murderer? Did it make you sympathetic toward him? Or how, if at all, might it have compromised your objectivity toward the other characters in the book?

3. Discuss the significance of young Crippen’s *Scientific American* magazine collection hidden beneath his mattress—and subsequently stolen by his mother. How influential was this episode to his development? Also, take a moment to talk about the Crippen family’s beliefs about religion and science, and nature vs. nurture.

4. What are the themes of mortality and morality that resonate throughout Crippen’s life? And in this novel?

5. Do you think there were similarities between Jezebel and Cora Crippen? Talk about the women in Crippen’s life, from the outspoken Charlotte to his one true love, Ethel. What common traits did these characters possess? How were they different? And how, if at all, were they stronger than their male counterpart?

6. *Crippen* is set primarily in Great Britain and on the open seas. In what ways did life on the ship mirror early twentieth-century English society? Discuss the microcosm of the *SS Montrose*. 
7. As for the characters aboard the Montrose: Was Crippen’s “Mr. Robinson” a believable creation, in your opinion? What about Edmund? In one scene, while looking at himself in the mirror, Edmund acknowledges that people “often believed what was presented to them and rarely challenged it, which was how [his] deception had worked so convincingly thus far.” Did the author convince you that the character of Edmund was “real”? Or did you see through the ruse right away?

8. How did you feel, after reading the Author’s Note, once you realized that the events of the night on which Cora “met her bloody end” were “entirely a supposition” on John Boyne’s part? Take a moment to talk about the nature of fact vs. fiction in Crippen.

9. A show of hands: Who, in the group, thinks that justice was served for Crippen? Who thinks that the case should have been considered a mistrial?

10. The circumstances of Crippen’s capture relied on a “cutting–edge” technological device: the Marconi telegraph. Indeed, the case was the first in which a murder suspect was traced by means of wireless communication. Take a moment to discuss some of our more modern crime-solving techniques—as seen and popularized by such television programs as Law & Order and CSI—and ask yourselves: How far have we come? Has higher technology made the world a safer, or more dangerous, place? As a side note, talk about the ways in which crime is portrayed in the media, either as news or entertainment. Why are we so drawn to novels of murder in the first place?

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