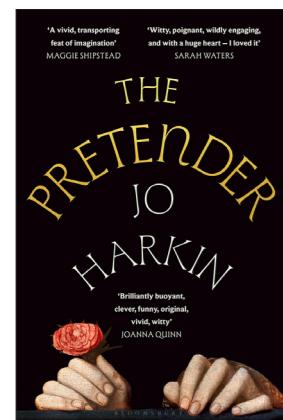


THE PRETENDER by JO HARKIN

Review by **John Davis**



JUST a few chapters in, I could imagine myself wandering around Farmer Collan's Oxfordshire fields with his young son, John, attired in my kirtle, hose and good strong clogs and perhaps twiddling a long piece of straw between my lips for effect.

Why is this observation important? Well, in order to appreciate the telling of this story, it is necessary to immerse yourself fully in the mores of the fifteenth century Britain, France and Ireland.

The writing style so successfully employed by Jo Harkin is vitally important in understanding what actually made the people of that time tick. There is 'dated' vocabulary to wrestle with too (puissant, maugre, lai) but usually the general context is a big help.

To set the scene. It is the tail-end of the War of the Roses, the House of Lancaster (Red Rose) versus the House of York (White Rose). Richard III has been deposed and Henry Tudor (Henry VII) rules. At first Henry is unaware that Edward Plantagenet, the Earl of Warwick, and a legitimate heir to the throne, has been spirited away in infancy to a farm in rural Oxfordshire, kept safe until he can return to champion the Yorkist cause and claim the country's top job.

Edward (The Pretender) is to undertake this secret odyssey from farm boy to sovereign by

not only switching locations, (Oxford, Burgundy, Ireland, London) and changing names, (John, Lambert, Simnel, Edward) but also coping with the emotional baggage besetting his impressionable juvenile mind.

There is a point midway through the book when Edward is told the court jester is always doleful because Lady Margaret never laughs at his jokes. Edward sees something of himself in the fool—always trying to guess at what's required but always failing to come up with the right solutions. We can sympathise.

This is at times a funny book not to say ribald in places. The naivety with which Edward comes to terms with how to use sheep's wool in a castle garderobe is a laugh out loud moment and the alliance he forms with strong willed Joan, the daughter of one of his sponsors in Ireland, is an engaging interlude. They compare notes on the stark realities of their future fifteenth century lives. For her arranged marriage or nunnery. For him the throne of England or a battlefield death.

To summarise, this is what historical novels should be about—vibrant, well researched, thought provoking and with relevant information woven carefully into the narrative not off-loaded in 'fact-drops'. All credit to the author for taking what is a minor footnote to Britain's history and turning it into such a fascinating read. Is Edward a bona fide usurper or is this yet another audacious identity scam? Best to enjoy the fictional narrative first then mug up on the actual recorded history afterwards.

Published by Bloomsbury

DEATH BY LIGHTNING

created by MIKE MAKOWSKY

Review by **John Davis**

Death by Lightning

Director: Matt Ross; created by Mike Makowsky from Candice Millard, *Destiny of the Republic* (2011) **Netflix, 6 Nov. 2025, 4 episodes**

IT'S staple pub quiz material: name the four assassinated presidents of the United States. Kennedy (1963) obviously springs to mind, coming in many people's life-time experience; the shooting of Abraham Lincoln (1865) shares the same notoriety.

I'll help with the other two. They were William McKinley (1901) and James A. Garfield (1881), the latter the subject of this short but engrossing and expertly directed mini-series.

Garfield, president for seven months, is admirably played by Michael Shannon. He is accurately portrayed as a shrewd, resolute, family-orientated individual, untainted by the endemic corruption of post-Civil War politics. Famously, he was nominated to be the Republican presidential candidate in 1880 despite not even seeking it, after making a speech nominating another at his party's national convention, but which so impressed the divided delegates with its obvious integrity that they united behind him in preference to all the formal candidates.

The twin focus thereafter is on Garfield's election and brief period in office, on the one hand, and on the other the obsessive lobbying for a political appointment by assassin-in-waiting Charles J. Guiteau, mesmerizingly played by Matthew Macfadyen. Macfadyen is in the same mould as Mark Rylance, able to convey more information by

facial expressions than a whole scene of action. He brilliantly depicts Guiteau's narcissistic, delusional character, convinced that his unrealistic claims to a consulship in Europe, despite his patent lack of qualifications, were merited by his erratic campaigning for Garfield's candidacy.

In the months before his assassination attempt Guiteau managed to meet Garfield once to press his claims, but when it became obvious that he would not be successful he became convinced that Garfield must be killed. He stalked the President for weeks, finally choosing a Washington railway station to carry out the shooting and making no attempt to flee. No manhunts needed here.

This drama scores highly for historical accuracy. It convincingly highlights the political in-fighting and chicanery of the period, especially as represented by Garfield's rivals Roscoe Conkling (Shea Whigham) and Chester A. Arthur (Nick Offerman). Other accurate details: the first doctor to attend Garfield was the black Charles Burleigh Purvis; and the president did indeed die from infection, caused by White House doctors probing his wound with unwashed hands.

Makowsky intended six episodes but was forced to cut costs, omitting Guiteau's trial in which he bizarrely claimed that he had chosen a British Bulldog pistol with an ornate handle because it would make the best museum piece. The jury took less than an hour to reach a verdict.

The title of the series comes from a comment said to be made by Garfield, that death by being struck by lightning was more likely than him being assassinated.

