Thunderstruck Study Guide

Thunderstruck by Erik Larson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Thunderstruck by Eric Larson is a non-fiction book with two main narrative threads. One story is that of the invention and development of wireless communication by Guglielmo Marconi and his associates. The second is the role that wireless played in apprehending the accused killer in a London murder case that was the sensation of its time. Both stories take place mainly during the first decade of the twentieth century in the reign of Britain's Edward VII, during a period known as the Edwardian age.

Marconi's story begins with his privileged childhood in Italy and introduces his passion for electricity. As a young man he moves to London, where he continues his experiments and founds a company that will pioneer wireless communication. Many other scientists are working simultaneously to discover the properties of electromagnetic waves, and Marconi is motivated by ambition as well as by the fear that someone else will be the first to capitalize on his discoveries. Gradually his experiments enable him to extend the distance that wireless messages can be accurately sent. Dogged by huge expense and public skepticism, Marconi works hard but maintains a lavish lifestyle.

Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen spends his childhood in Michigan and has a checkered career as an employee of patent medicine companies on both sides of the Atlantic. He is dominated by his wife Cora, who later calls herself Belle Elmore. Belle is intent on pursuing a career in music despite her marked lack of talent. The marriage reaches a breaking point during a period when they are living in London. Belle has other interests and friends. Crippen has met Ethel Le Neve, a young girl who is captivated by his gentle manner.

It is a surprise to all when Crippen announces in January 1910 that Belle has left him. Her disappearance raises suspicions, especially after Crippen claims that she has died in America and then reverses himself, admitting that he doesn't know where she is. Chief Inspector Dew conducts an investigation on behalf of Scotland Yard. Crippen is not under suspicion, however, until he and Ethel suddenly leave London.

When decaying tissue remains are uncovered in the basement of Crippen's house, the inquiry intensifies. Due to international press coverage, the case becomes a worldwide sensation, and it is dubbed the North London Cellar Murder.

Henry Kendall, the captain of the SS Montrose, learns of the search for Crippen just before his ship sets sail from Antwerp. He takes note of the Robinsons, ostensibly a father and son, who are traveling together as second-class passengers. Methodically Kendall learns what he can about them during their first days at sea. When he is satisfied that his suspicions have merit, he contacts the nearest wireless station. He does nothing, however, to make the Robinsons think that they are under scrutiny.

Acting on Kendall's tip, Inspector Dew immediately boards a faster ship, intending to reach Canada ahead of the Montrose. The chase becomes public, and newspapers offer daily updates to fascinated readers. Dew succeeds in apprehending Crippen when

the Montrose reaches Father Point in the St. Lawrence Seaway, and Crippen and Ethel are conveyed back to England, where Crippen stands trial and is condemned to death. Wireless communication has proved its reliability and utility.

[Prologue] The Mysterious Passengers

[Prologue] The Mysterious Passengers Summary and Analysis

A short introductory section offers a tantalizing glimpse of the mystery at the center of the book, although the reader doesn't yet know exactly what crime will be committed or who will be involved. The reader is introduced here to the two main themes of the book: the expansion of wireless communication and its role in solving a crime that attracted worldwide attention.

It is July 20, 1910. Captain Henry George Kendall watches as passengers board his ship, the SS Montrose, which is due to depart soon from Antwerp for Quebec City, Canada. The Montrose is equipped with modern wireless apparatus and its crew includes a wireless operator. Captain Kendall is a thorough professional and devotes himself not only to expert navigation but also to making himself congenial to his passengers. He keeps abreast of the news, and has read the latest articles from London newspapers about the search for two individuals who are believed to be connected to a murder investigation. The Montrose hasn't been at sea for long when Kendall sees the Robinsons, who are traveling as father and son, holding hands. Afterwards he orders the ship's stewards to remove all the newspapers on board.

This brief section, just five pages long, introduces the main themes of the book: the successful development of wireless communication and the crime that was known as the North London Cellar Murder. The rest of the book focuses on the correspondences and connections between these narratives. Significantly, the physical sensations accompanying early wireless communication are described here for the first time, including a sound that is compared to "miniature thunder" (p. 3). The section also establishes a mood of suspense, since the reader doesn't learn the identity of the murder victim or how the crime is connected with the "mysterious passengers" until much later in the narrative.

Part I, Ghosts and Gunfire

Part I, Ghosts and Gunfire Summary and Analysis

Part I is made up of seven chapters. The reader meets several of the book's most significant characters, such as Guglielmo Marconi, Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen, and Cora/Belle Elmore. The section offers a preliminary look at the study of electricity, and sketches the lives of Marconi and Crippen before they each arrive separately in London in the late 1890s.

In June 1894, Oliver Lodge, a noted professor of physics, gives a lecture at the Royal Institution in London about the work of Heinrich Hertz, who has died recently. Hertz was the first to demonstrate the existence of electromagnetic waves, although Lodge's work has been on a close parallel. During the lecture, Lodge uses a "coherer" filled with metal filings to send electromagnetic waves racing through the lecture hall. Their passage is marked by a sound like a gun being fired, and produces a flash of light in a separate electrical apparatus. The audience is astonished by the fact that Lodge has used Hertz's waves to forge an invisible connection between two disparate devices. Rather than continuing his promising research, however, Lodge becomes distracted by his competing interest in spiritualism and the supernatural.

During the same summer, the 20-year-old Guglielmo Marconi reads an obituary of Hertz and instantly conceives the idea of sending messages between distant places using Hertz's waves. Marconi has been fascinated by electricity since childhood, although he has no formal scientific training. He begins to conduct experiments in relaying signals between two devices, motivated by the fear that someone else will be the first to capitalize on this property of electromagnetic waves.

The scene moves to Brooklyn, New York, where Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen, a widower, practices medicine. Crippen is originally from Michigan and worked briefly in London before returning to the United States to finish his training. He moved to San Diego with Charlotte, his first wife, and their son Otto was born there. Charlotte dies suddenly in 1892. Crippen leaves the boy with his grandparents and goes to New York, where he meets the 17-year-old Cora Turner later the same year. Cora is afflicted with an internal ailment that is described as a "female problem," and eventually has her ovaries removed in an operation that leaves a large scar across her abdomen. Unable to bear children, Cora devotes her time to singing lessons, which Crippen pays for despite their declining economic situation during the Panic of '93. Ambitious for personal and financial success, Cora becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her life and her husband.

The focus shifts back to Oliver Lodge and his psychic experiments in France. An Italian medium convinces him that she is able to communicate with the spirit world, further distracting him from his experiments with electricity. Marconi, meanwhile, has accidentally discovered that a tall antenna enables him to send signals farther than

ever. He succeeds in transmitting a signal 1500 yards to a receiver that is out of sight, an important breakthrough.

Seeking to earn more money to keep Cora happy, Crippen is hired by the Munyon Homeopathic Home Remedy Company. Although the American economy is still tangled in the effects of the Panic of '93, patent medicine is a booming industry. It is largely unregulated, widely advertised, and offers alternate remedies for anyone who cannot afford to consult a doctor.

Marconi decides to take his invention to London, although his apparatus is destroyed on arrival by customs officials who fear that it is a bomb. Around the same time, Crippen is assigned to manage the Munyon London office, although Cora refuses to accompany him to England.

Analysis

This section introduces the book's two principal characters, Marconi and Crippen, along with the writing style that will be employed throughout. The narrative shifts rapidly back and forth between the stories of these two characters. Some chapters are extremely brief, scarcely two pages long, which gives the writing a punchy momentum.

Important background information is presented in this first section, including a condensed history of the study of electricity and a description of what the world was like when communication was neither quick nor easy. Foreshadowing hints at multiple significant developments to come, including a reference to the drug hyoscine hydrobromide, Crippen's study of surgery in Cleveland, and Cora's impressive abdominal scar from her ovariectomy.

Marconi and Crippen never meet in real life, but they both arrive in London around the same time. The author takes this opportunity to paint a detailed word picture of the city as it was in 1896-1897, describing its size and population near the end of the Victorian era, the increasing awareness of poverty and inequality, the demands of the suffragettes, worries about attacks by anarchists, and concerns about crime in the aftermath of the Jack the Ripper murders. The personality of the aged reigning Queen Victoria is contrasted with that of her son and heir, the self-indulgent and highly social Prince of Wales, Albert Edward.

Part II, Betrayal

Part II, Betrayal Summary and Analysis

This section, with ten chapters, is devoted mainly to Marconi's efforts to set up his company, advance his experiments in wireless communication, and build transmission stations in England. Crippen's wife joins him in London and takes a stage name, Belle Elmore. Their marriage grows increasingly troubled. The section ends with the death of Queen Victoria.

Marconi uses his mother's relatives and their London connections to finagle an introduction to William Preece, the chief electrician of the British Post Office. Marconi knows that Preece is at the forefront of developments in telegraphy. Preece is impressed by Marconi's demonstration and shares his vision for the potential of wireless communication. Gradually Marconi succeeds in transmitting signals that cross ever greater distances. Still worried that his discoveries will be stolen, Marconi begins the process of applying for a patent. In a lecture series, Preece describes Marconi as the inventor of wireless telegraphy, which alarms Lodge and others who believe that their work is being overlooked. In 1896 Preece stages a Marconi experiment at one of his lectures and succeeds in ringing a bell using a wireless signal from a transmitter. The experiment is covered in the worldwide press, although the British scientific community is suspicious of Marconi's achievement.

Meanwhile, Cora has finally agreed to join Crippen in London, and they take a flat in Bloomsbury. Cora performs in variety halls, even writing some of her own material for a show that is a failure. Crippen is transferred back to Philadelphia, but returns to London shortly to manage a different patent medicine company. In his absence, Cora begins to use a new stage name, Belle Elmore, and to associate with Bruce Miller, a former boxer who becomes her constant companion.

Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany is eager to increase his country's prestige and military prowess. He takes a keen interest in Marconi's wireless experiments and sends a representative to observe some tests in 1897. Based on what he has seen, the German engineer tries to reconstruct what he has seen of Marconi's apparatus. Marconi receives business propositions from investors in England and the United States, and is concerned that it will take too long to negotiate an arrangement with Preece and the British Post Office. Instead, he accepts an offer from his cousin to establish a company with a syndicate of investors. The Wireless Telegraph and Signal Co., headquartered in London, is formed in 1897. As a founding director, Marconi receives £15,000, more than one and a half million dollars today. Preece, who has been urging the Post Office to acquire Marconi's patents, is dismayed that he has been excluded from the deal.

In 1898 Marconi receives welcome publicity when he successfully facilitates communication between Queen Victoria at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight and her son Edward, who is recuperating from an injury on board the royal yacht two miles

away. Marconi realizes that wireless communication will have great value for ships at sea, and by 1899 has successfully sent messages across the English Channel. Inventors in America, France, and Germany are also racing to transmit messages wirelessly.

Marconi approaches John Ambrose Fleming, an electrical engineer and associate of Oliver Lodge, for professional assistance. Fleming's letter praising Marconi is published in The Times, London's preeminent newspaper, and he is put under contract to the Marconi company.

Still dissatisfied with her life and under the influence of Bruce Miller, Belle attempts to revive her performance career. She begins to dye her hair blond and joins a charity group called the Music Hall Ladies' Guild that is dedicated to assisting poor and elderly performers. The members of the guild become some of Belle's closest friends, and a few of them are treated to a viewing of her abdominal scar.

Marconi foresees that wireless transmission will one day take the place of transatlantic cables, which relay messages quickly but expensively. To many this seems unlikely, given the prevailing scientific opinion that electromagnetic waves travel only in a straight line, making it impossible for them to follow the curvature of the earth. Marconi's next step is an attempt to send wireless messages between stations across the Atlantic. He believes that this can be achieved using transmitters on extremely tall masts. In 1899 he goes to New York and uses wireless to cover the America's Cup yacht race. On the voyage home he succeeds in sending a message from 66 nautical miles, a new record. The transmitting station in England responds with word of the Boer War and other news, which is circulated in the form of the first shipboard newspaper. On the same ocean crossing, Marconi meets Josephine Bowen Holman, an heiress from Indianapolis, and by the end of the voyage they are secretly engaged to be married.

In 1899 Britain's Admiralty places an order with Marconi's company for wireless sets to outfit ships as well as the construction of shore stations. Under British law, however, the investment allows the Royal Navy to adapt Marconi's invention for its own use. In response, Marconi develops a new revenue strategy: his company will provide a wireless service contingent upon the rental of Marconi gear. The operators will remain employees of the Marconi company. This allows Marconi greater control over his growing business and means that shipping lines will be likely to use Marconi wireless exclusively. A location in Cornwall, known as Poldhu for its proximity to a hotel of that name, is chosen to be the site of a coastal wireless station. The section ends with the death of Queen Victoria in January 1901, an event that is seen to represent the end of an age.

This section expands on earlier details about London with portrayals of the Bloomsbury set and its influence on changes in society and the sexual mores of the late 19th century. This meshes with another theme, the acceleration of change in the wider world, with cars and ships becoming faster, and the rapid pace of scientific innovation.

Suspense is heightened when the narrative jumps ahead in time to the later interrogation of Bruce Miller by a prominent barrister at the Old Bailey. The exchange is given as a series of quoted statements, producing a staccato effect with little additional narration or embellishment. The quotations elaborate on the context of Miller's relationship with Belle. At this point the reader still doesn't know who will be involved in the sensational murder, although suspicions have been raised by the tone of the narrative and pronounced foreshadowing.

The author's gift for telling detail is highlighted when he sums up the relationship between Belle and Bruce Miller by taking note of their fondness for champagne. The two maintain a tradition of dating the corks from bottles they share, and Belle keeps the corks on a string, not troubling to conceal them from her husband. This also underscores the author's pity for Crippen, who is referred to as "the little doctor" (p. 90).

Another narrative thread is introduced with the revelation of Kaiser Wilhelm's interest in Marconi's experiments and German efforts to copy his inventions. The looming war with Germany is an undercurrent throughout the rest of the book. Also noted is the public doubt about the efficacy of wireless, which is described as a "wall of skepticism" (p. 102), mingled with a fear of the noise and light effects that are produced by electromagnetic waves.

Part III, Secrets

Part III, Secrets Summary and Analysis

This section, the longest in the book, is made up of eleven chapters. Marconi continues to conduct experiments and expand the size and number of his transmission stations, but the main action belongs to Crippen. His life takes a fateful turn, and the section ends with the shocking news that Belle has died in America.

Crippen meets Ethel Le Neve when she goes to work for a patent medicine company where he is employed. Drawn to the gentle doctor, she becomes his private secretary. She witnesses several tempestuous scenes between Crippen and Belle, and learns that Belle has exchanged affectionate letters with Bruce Miller, who has rejoined his wife in Chicago. When Ethel discovers the letters, she feels less guilty about the growing attachment she shares with Crippen.

Marconi scouts for a site for a North American station, and settles on South Wellfleet, a Cape Cod location that was familiar to the American essayist Henry David Thoreau. Richard Vyvyan is left to assemble the twenty masts that will make up the station, although he is concerned about whether the design can withstand the weather on the windy point.

Belle and Crippen move again, this time to 39 Hilldrop Crescent in the Kentish Town area of London. Belle continues to spend money freely on clothes and personal adornments. For a brief time they have three young German boarders. In 1907 Crippen rents a bedroom elsewhere under an assumed name.

Still in quest of transatlantic wireless communication, Marconi seeks out a new station in Newfoundland, closer to Britain. While he is there, he learns that the Cape Cod station, on which he has spent heavily, has been completely destroyed by a violent storm.

Ethel Le Neve moves to a new boarding house and apparently suffers a miscarriage, although she will not reveal the name of the baby's father. Belle threatens repeatedly to leave Crippen because he is unable to make her happy. On January 15, 1910, Crippen purchases a quantity of hyoscine hydrobromide. The druggist assumes that Crippen will use the potent ingredient in homeopathic medicines, but the hyoscine is so rare and lethal that it must be ordered specially. When his order arrives at the druggist's four days later, Crippen appears unconcerned when he is asked to sign for the delivery in the firm's "poisons book."

Marconi conceals his real purpose in going to Newfoundland from the press and even from some of his closest associates. He has decided to try to strengthen his signals by using kites and balloons, although gale winds cause the loss of many instruments.

In late January, 1910, Crippen prevails on two friends, Paul and Clara Martinetti, to have dinner at Hilldrop Crescent. Although Paul is unwell, Crippen insists. The Martinettis

stay late into the evening. When they have gone, Belle is severely critical about Crippen's behavior and renews her threats to leave him. The next morning Crippen goes to his office as usual, and when he returns at 7:30 that evening, the house is empty.

Still using kites, Marconi's operators at Signal Hill believe that they have received a signal from Poldhu, but there are no independent witnesses. This angers Marconi's colleagues who have not been informed about his current experiments.

Crippen tells Ethel about his wife's departure and offers her Belle's jewelry, including a distinctive brooch in a rising sun pattern with diamonds and pearls. The guild ladies are amazed by Belle's disappearance, which Crippen explains by saying that she has gone to America to nurse a close relative. Before long, he says he has been informed by telegram that Belle has fallen ill. Wearing Belle's brooch, Ethel accompanies Crippen to a banquet at the Criterion restaurant in Piccadilly. Ladies of the guild begin to be more curious about Belle's disappearance. Not long afterwards, Ethel moves into the Hilldrop Crescent house with Crippen.

As a result of threatened legal action by Anglo-American Telegraph Co., the provider of cable service between Britain and Newfoundland, Marconi moves his transmission station to Glace Bay in Nova Scotia.

The chapter comes to an abrupt close with the transcript of a letter from Crippen to Clara and Paul Martinetti, followed by a telegram dated March 24, 1910, in which he informs them that Belle is dead.

The section title highlights themes in the lives of Marconi as well as the Crippens. Marconi is secretive about his attempts to transmit messages across the Atlantic, and the Crippens continue to keep up the pretense that they are happily married. "Secrets" also form part of other plot developments, including Crippen's decision to rent a boardinghouse room under an assumed name. Subsequently, the reader discovers that Crippen's account of Belle's disappearance has also contained secrets.

As the narrative shifts back and forth between the two stories, it is potentially confusing that the events from Marconi's life in this section take place mainly in 1901, while developments in the Crippens' story move from that year all the way up to 1910.

Quoted dialogue extracted from court records, statements and letters is used to bring immediacy to this section. Thoreau's reflections on the South Wellfleet site contrast the natural environment of fifty years earlier with the technology-driven "thunder factory" (p. 153) that Marconi will erect.

The Crippens' move to Hilldrop Crescent gives rise to a detailed description of the house, inside and out, which will gain significance later on. The author also brings in information about prevailing economic and social conditions in London at the time, noting that Hilldrop Crescent, initially a prosperous address, is in decline by the time Crippen lives there. In particular, the neighborhood's proximity to two notorious prisons makes it less desirable for residents. This detail will take on added significance later on.

The author's portrait of Belle amounts to oblique criticism, citing her tacky house décor, overspending, and sloppy housekeeping. The later statement of a German student who briefly boarded with the Crippens is used to fill in details about the couple's daily life. Parts of this section are redundant, with numerous mentions of Belle's threats to leave Crippen and of their beautiful back garden, which will later be the scene of the presumed incineration of some of Belle's remains. Larson also reiterates the fact that Crippen and Belle both took pains to make their marriage appear outwardly happy.

Marconi's stations are necessarily located along shorelines for maximum advantage in transmitting across the Atlantic. Struggles with the weather, including violent winds, variations in temperature, blizzards, hail and sleet are an underlying theme of this section.

The stunning news of Belle's illness and death acquires great impact because it is not related in the style of the rest of the section; instead, the author chooses to quote directly a letter written by Crippen to the Martinettis, followed on the same page by his telegram stating that Belle has died. No other comment is offered; the documents are allowed to speak for themselves.

Part IV, An Inspector Calls

Part IV, An Inspector Calls Summary and Analysis

There are eight chapters in this section, which continues the story of Marconi's experiments along with developments in his personal life. The real drama, however, is provided by Crippen's unfolding story. A new character is introduced, Inspector Dew, whose investigation of Belle's disappearance will have devastating consequences for Crippen.

In January 1902 Marconi's neglected fiancée breaks off their engagement. Marconi publicly criticizes William Preece and Oliver Lodge at his annual shareholders' meeting, a move that is unpopular with the press and scientific journals. On his next trip to New York, Marconi proves conclusively that messages can be sent and received at distances exceeding two thousand miles. At the same time, he realizes that sunlight interferes with his wireless transmissions in ways that he still cannot understand or explain. Nevil Maskelyne, a magician, is employed by a cable company that decides to erect its own wireless station, and he succeeds in picking up signals from the Marconi station in Poldhu.

The suspicions of Belle's friends in the Ladies' Guild are heightened when they hear of her death. Two of them decide to confront Crippen directly, but they are not satisfied by his confused and incomplete answers. In particular, he does not seem to know exactly where Belle was when she died. Ethel works hard to clean up the messy Hilldrop Crescent house, and she and others notice a pervasive stench that seems to come from the basement.

Marconi returns to Nova Scotia with the intention of sending complete messages across the Atlantic. He and Vyvyan fine-tune the station. Marconi succeeds in sending a message to Poldhu in December 1902, and immediately attempts to send a public message. After several failed attempts, he succeeds in transmitting a message that is written and witnessed by the London Times' Ottawa correspondent. Diplomatically, two other messages are transmitted to King Edward VII and King Victor Emmanuel in Rome. Vyvyan, however, notes that parts of the message are distorted and raises questions about the system's reliability. Marconi directs all three stations to be closed in order to address their problems. In the spring of 1903, the entre station at Glace Bay collapses after an ice storm.

Two of Belle's friends decide to take their suspicions to New Scotland Yard. They tell the story to Frank C. Froest, head of the Murder Squad. He listens and summons a detective, Chief Inspector Walter Dew. No one is inclined to suspect foul play at this point, but Dew decides to look into the matter personally.

During a lecture by Fleming at the Royal Institution in 1903, Marconi arranges to send a message from Poldhu as a demonstration of how far his operation has come. Before the

official message arrives, however, pirate signals are sent by Maskelyne, the magician and amateur inventor, that are intended to embarrass the Marconi company. The rogue signals are unnoticed by the audience, but Fleming is offended and takes up the matter in public in a series of letters in the Times. At the end of the year, Marconi does not renew Fleming's contract.

Pursuing his investigation, Inspector Dew meets with several of Belle's friends from the Guild. Based on some contradictory details, he decides to call on Crippen at Hilldrop Crescent. Only a servant girl and Ethel are at home, and Dew asks Ethel to take him to Crippen's office. Crippen appears to be serene, although he admits that he has been lying about Belle's death. In fact, he now says he believes that Belle is still alive. Ethel is visibly shocked when Dew informs her of this.

In 1904, Marconi decides to enlarge his stations in order to make them more powerful and increase the distance of transmissions. He feels defeated by public skepticism, although more ships than ever are using wireless and lives have been saved due to improved communications. During the summer of 1904 he meets Beatrice O'Brien, who is much younger than Marconi. Assuming that they are no more than friends, Beatrice is surprised when Marconi asks her to marry him, and declines. Marconi leaves for the Balkans, where he falls ill with malaria. He will continue to suffer from complications of the disease throughout his life.

Beatrice and Marconi meet again, and this time she agrees to become engaged. Although Beatrice's brother and mother disapprove of her foreign suitor, despite his fame and supposed wealth, she is now determined to marry him.

Analysis

The author demonstrates his gift for revealing detail, as when he notes that a New York banquet in Marconi's honor ended with "bowls of sorbet, decorated with telegraph poles and wireless masts" (p. 215).

Narrative problems with the staggered chronology continue in this section. The sequence of events is particularly jarring when the 1910 death of Edward VII is announced, along with an appearance by Halley's comet. The following chapter immediately picks up Marconi's story in 1902.

It is a tribute to the author's skill in narrative pacing that he manages to make Marconi's incremental progress and endless experimentation interesting. The actions of Fleming, Maskelyne, Preece and Lodge are important to Marconi's story, but they cannot compete in terms of drama on the page with what is happening in Crippen's life.

The description of Dew's first trip to Hilldrop Crescent is told twice, according in two separate, and slightly differing, accounts. One comes from Dew's reminiscences and the other is related by Ethel. Together they build a textured picture of the early stages of Dew's investigation.

The final chapter is an essay on the new century, with its obsession with speed, worries about German militarization, and alarm about Britain's immigrant population and its effect on society. Britain is generally thought to be in decline, despite various studies and reports that show the contrary. The section concludes with a description of the premiere of James M. Barrie's popular new play, Peter Pan, in late 1904. The play touches a chord, with its nostalgia and evocation of ever-present evil. This makes a connection back to the beginning of the book, where a Barrie quote from Peter Pan about "recalling the past" is used as an epigraph to introduce the narrative.

Part V, The Finest Time

Part V, The Finest Time Summary and Analysis

In a section made up of ten chapters, some of them extremely brief, the reader finally learns the details of the murder that has been foreshadowed since the book's beginning. The gruesome discovery of a decomposed body in the basement of the house at Hilltop Crescent is contrasted with the shipboard happiness of Crippen and Ethel, their "finest time."

The section leads off with an account of Dew's first interview with Crippen. The doctor explains that he wanted to find a way to cover up Belle's disappearance without scandal, and with that aim has invented her death. Crippen allows Dew to search his home, and agrees to place an advertisement to see if Belle can be located. After the detectives leave, Ethel tells Crippen that his deception has upset her greatly. Crippen proposes a plan that he says will protect her from future humiliation.

Marconi and Beatrice are married in London in 1905. They spend their honeymoon at Beatrice's family home in Ireland, where Beatrice sees a different side of Marconi. Instead of the charming gentleman whom she has become accustomed to, he is governed by fluctuating moods and they quarrel a lot. When they return to London, Marconi returns to work on his stations. Beatrice travels with him to Canada in 1905. When they reach Nova Scotia, they stay in a small, remote house with Vyvyan and his family. Marconi leaves Beatrice there for three months while he returns to England. Using trial and error, he realizes that horizontal antennas perform even better than vertical ones, so that taller and taller towers are not necessary.

Inspector Dew still does not suspect that a crime has been committed, but he must locate Belle in order to close the case. Crippen sends his assistant to purchase a suit of boy's clothes, which he asks Ethel to put on. Ethel is amused by this, and even allows Crippen to cut her hair. Masquerading as the Robinsons, a father and son, they take a train to Harwich, and then the night boat to Holland, continuing to Rotterdam by train. They visit Brussels, where the innkeeper notices that they have only a single suitcase. Back in London, Dew decides to call on Crippen for a final interview.

Marconi is threatened by steep financial losses as his company takes on the expense of relocating his transmission stations. Nevil Maskelyne, who continues to present magic shows, secures rights to American wireless technology and forms a competing company of his own. Beatrice becomes pregnant and gives birth to a daughter in their Mayfair house. The child is sickly, however, and dies soon afterwards. Marconi has difficulty in finding a burial place, because the infant was never baptized. Another daughter is born in 1908, and Marconi names her Degna, a name he found in a history of Venice.

Dew and Arthur Mitchell, his assistant, visit Crippen's workplace and learn that the doctor departed two days earlier, carrying a suitcase. They go to Hilldrop Crescent and

the French maid tells them that Ethel and Crippen are both gone. Dew and Mitchell make a more thorough search of the house, finding a loaded revolver that Crippen has left behind. On their fourth search of the house, they locate loose bricks in the basement. Underneath the bricks they uncover decomposing tissue and a quantity of skin, which has apparently been stripped off a body. They do not locate bones, teeth, or a head. Although there is no solid proof yet to connect the remains with Belle, or to accuse Crippen of any crime, Scotland Yard expands the manhunt for Crippen and Ethel.

Marconi's wireless service continues to expand, although the German Telefunken company is an increasingly serious competitor. Ship travelers send Marconigrams back and forth regularly across the Atlantic. In December 1909, Marconi is awarded the Nobel prize for physics, despite his lack of academic training. In his acceptance speech, Marconi admits that there is much about the behavior of electric waves that he does not yet understand.

The remains from Crippen's cellar are removed for further study. Other objects are also found, including a Hinde's curler, a woman's camisole, and strands of blond hair entwined with a large white handkerchief. One section of skin has a prominent mark on its surface. They also find a section of a man's pajama top that is stained with blood.

Crippen and Ethel, who is still dressed as a boy, decide to leave Europe for America. Crippen purchases tickets on the SS Montrose, scheduled to depart Antwerp on July 20.

The London Times has been tracking developments in the Hilldrop Crescent case, calling it "The North London Cellar Murder." The story is an international sensation, and Scotland Yard receives various tips about sightings of the fugitive couple. There are numerous false arrests and the home secretary, Winston Churchill, offers a reward of £250. Dew and Mitchell continue to interview people who knew Crippen and Ethel, and they learn of Belle's operation and large abdominal scar. Dew connects this with the piece of skin that they have found in Hilldrop Crescent.

Analysis

In this section the author relies heavily on statements and accounts written by the central players in the Crippen case, including Dew, Ethel, and Crippen himself. These direct quotations are used as dialogue, and provide vivid supporting detail along with revelations about the characters' thoughts and feelings. When not using quoted material, the narrative uses an omniscient voice.

One of the sea voyages undertaken by Beatrice and Marconi is used to spotlight problems in their marriage. The author demonstrates his typically apt choice of telling detail when Marconi is shown discarding socks that he has worn through the stateroom's porthole. He explains to his astonished wife that it is more efficient to get new pairs than to wait for the others to be washed.

The grotesque discovery of decomposing remains at Hilldrop Crescent is related with notes of sly humor in reference to the "janitorial aspects" of the murder: that is, the

disposal of blood and tissue. With deadpan seriousness, the author goes even further: "On that score Crippen's bull terrier had perhaps proved an able assistant" (pp. 319-320). Becoming serious again, Larson wonders " . . . how he [Crippen] had then managed to erase the knowledge of the act from his eyes and visage?" (p. 320).

The birth of Marconi's son while he is at sea sums up several narrative themes: the damage to relationship between Marconi and his wife, as well as the increasing utility and reliability of wireless. Since Beatrice doesn't know what ship Marconi is on when their child is born in London, she sends out a message addressed simply to "Marconi-Atlantic." In the following paragraph, Larson states tersely, "He got it." The "reservoir of doubt" surrounding the utility of wireless communication, he says, had been "rupture[d]" (p. 323).

Part VI, Pursuit by Thunder

Part VI, Pursuit by Thunder Summary and Analysis

This section of twelve chapters finally answers some of the questions raised in the book's prologue, with its reference to the "mysterious passengers." The climax of the narrative action occurs here, with the pursuit and apprehension of Crippen and Ethel.

Crippen and Ethel enjoy their ocean crossing and are gratified by the amount of attention paid them by Kendall, the ship's captain. Kendall still has deep suspicions and secretly searches their cabin, but is cautious about raising a false alarm. He realizes, however, that if he is to send a message back to England, he must do so while he is still within 150 miles of shore, corresponding to the range of his shipboard transmitter. Kendall probes his passengers without arousing their suspicions, and sees that the boy's table manners are delicate, while the father discusses seasickness with medical knowledge. On July 22, he composes a message that is sent to the station at Poldhu, stating that he believes that Crippen and his "accomplice" are passengers on the SS Montrose. He receives no reply.

In fact, Dew is made aware of the message later that evening. He approaches his supervisor with a plan: Dew will sail on a fast steamer and try to intercept Crippen before he reaches Quebec. The plan is acknowledged as risky, but it is approved. Dew takes a train to Liverpool, and embarks on the Laurentic the following evening. He travels under the name of Dewhurst. Attempts are made from the Laurentic to contact Kendall on the Montrose, but there is no answer.

Worldwide interest in the North London Cellar Murders continues to build.

On July 24th, the Montrose intercepts a message from a London newspaper that is intended for the Laurentic. Are "passengers excited over chase," it inquires? This is Kendall's first inkling that his information has both been taken seriously and has in fact become public knowledge. News reporters soon discover the identities of the two ships, and readers are intrigued by every detail. Those following the story are particularly taken with the fact that Crippen and Ethel are unaware that they are being pursued.

Forensic work goes on at Hilldrop Crescent, and neighbors report hearing gunshots and screams one night in either late January or early February. There are reports of smoke rising from Crippen's garden around the same time, and a doorman remembers taking away many baskets of partially burned women's clothing and other ashy residue.

On July 27, Dew's ship passes the Montrose, although the two vessels are never in sight of each other. Dew sends a wireless message to Kendall saying that he plans to board the Montrose at Father Point. Reporters converge on the St. Lawrence Seaway. Kendall is basking in the attention, and writes a descriptive report for the Daily Mail, which is sent via wireless to the newspaper's representative in Montreal.

Ethel is eager to reach America at last, but notices that Crippen becomes anxious. He gives her money in case, he says, they are separated.

In London, the investigation of the remains starts to focus on the presence of possible poison. Putting droplets of an alkaloid compound into the eye of a cat, the physician is able to narrow down the substance to one of three poisons, one of which is hyoscine. The cat is adopted by laboratory assistants and named Crippen.

On the afternoon of July 29, Chief Inspector Dew arrives at Father Point, where a mass of reporters is waiting. Dew is perturbed by their unruly behavior, and further alarmed when he hears that some reporters plan to intercept the Montrose before it reaches Father Point. Dew arranges to signal the reporters if the passengers turn out to be Crippen and Ethel. Early on Sunday morning, the Montrose whistles to inform Father Point of its arrival. Crippen goes on deck alone, because Ethel wants to finish the book she is reading.

Dew is carried out on the pilot boat that is to conduct the Montrose through the seaway. On board, he accompanies Kendall to his cabin while Crippen is summoned. When Crippen appears, Inspector Dew wishes him a good morning and arrests him for the "murder and mutilation" of his wife. Crippen is handcuffed, and Dew seeks out Ethel, who faints when she recognizes him.

Analysis

This section brings the reader back full circle to the book's prologue, "The Mysterious Passengers." The identities of the two travelers who have raised Captain Kendall's suspicions are finally revealed. Many of the chapters that make up this section are very brief, heightening the speed of plot developments and giving the sense of an acceleration in the narrative.

Dramatically, the author tells how the original message sent by Captain Kendall from the Montrose was conveyed to London. "Its train of waves struck the giant receiving antenna at Poldhu . . . ." (p. 334), was received by Marconi's magnetic detector, which was connected to a Morse inker that generated a tape with dots and dashes spelling out Kendall's Marconigram message. The communication went by landline to the Canadian Pacific office in Liverpool, police were summoned, and a message was sent back south to Scotland Yard. This serves as a summing-up of the effect that Marconi's vision has had upon communication.

Later in the section Larson adds a dose of irony when he notes Crippen's interest in the Montrose's Marconi room. He observes that wireless is a "wonderful invention" (p. 350), little knowing that the invention has in fact sealed his fate.

Epilogue, Into the Ether

Epilogue, Into the Ether Summary and Analysis

This section, in three chapters, wraps up the stories of many of the characters in Thunderstruck, with one exception. Ethel Le Neve is the subject of a separate section at the very end of the book.

Shortly after Crippen and Ethel have been arrested in Canada, London detectives discover Crippen's documented purchase of hyoscine. Mitchell joins Dew in Canada to help escort the prisoners back across the Atlantic. On shipboard, Crippen busies himself with reading. He is allowed to see Ethel once, but is not permitted to speak with her.

Crippen's trial begins on October 18 in the Old Bailey. Testimony is concluded in a matter of days, and the jury deliberates for twenty-seven minutes before delivering a guilty verdict. Ethel is brought to trial separately, and is determined to have been ignorant of the murder. Crippen is executed by hanging at Pentonville Prison on November 23.

There continues to be speculation about the case, focusing on Crippen's gentle demeanor and his ability to drag Belle's large corpse to the basement and dispose of all the blood. Members of the Ladies' Guild are permitted to inter Belle's remains at St. Pancras cemetery.

Dew retires soon after the conclusion of the Crippen case and writes a best-selling book about his experience. Kendall receives the monetary award for apprehending Crippen, but keeps the check as a souvenir. His long seafaring career includes another stint commanding the Montrose during World War I, carrying Belgian refugees to safety. He lives until the mid '60s.

The Crippen case lives on in the work of Alfred Hitchcock and Raymond Chandler. During the Blitz, a bomb falls on Hilldrop Crescent. Thanks to the Crippen case, wireless telegraphy is finally shown to be practical and useful. A year and a half later, a Marconi wireless operator on the Titanic signals for help, saving many lives. Both Marconi and his wife were supposed to be passengers on the Titanic, although Marconi changed his plans and later Beatrice canceled when their son fell ill.

Marconi and Beatrice finally divorce in 1923. Beatrice later helps him to obtain an annulment so that he can remarry. His inventions lead to rapid further innovation, and in 1933 Marconi sends a message from the Chicago Century of Progress Exhibition that is relayed around the world in three and a half minutes. He dies of a heart attack in 1937, and wireless communication worldwide stops for two minutes in observance of his funeral.

Lodge continues to agitate to have his contributions recognized. When his youngest son is killed in World War I, he writes a book describing his spiritual communication with the boy which becomes very popular.

The author deals briskly with Crippen's trial, probably because he has already used so many extracts from the trial transcripts earlier in the book. With his knack for telling detail, he includes information about how the hangman used Crippen's height, weight, and body type to calculate the "drop" so that Crippen would be killed instantly but not decapitated. The gloom of this episode is accented by the added detail that the hangman later committed suicide.

Summing up the loose ends, Larson says that "Mystery lingered around the Crippen case like tulle fog at a cemetery" (p. 372). Of Crippen's heinous crime, Larson says that "something in his soul fractured" (p. 374).

A final look at Beatrice comes with her poignant incognito visit to Marconi's lying in state. The author concludes his account of Marconi's life on an elegiac note when he mentions the halt in telegraphy worldwide to mark the beginning of Marconi's funeral: "For possibly the last time in human history, the 'great hush' again prevailed" (p. 385). "Great Hush" is a phrase coined by Marconi's daughter Degna, which was introduced earlier (p. 19) to describe the period of history before Marconi.

Coda, Voyager

Coda, Voyager Summary and Analysis

A final section relates what became of Ethel Le Neve after her involvement with Crippen.

On the day of Crippen's execution, Ethel boards a White Star liner in Southampton. She travels as Miss Allen and intends to build a new life for herself. After a brief stay in Canada, however, she returns to England. She marries a furniture store clerk and raises two children. Her husband never learns of the scandal in her past.

A journalist approaches Ethel a few years before her death. The writer has discovered the truth of Ethel's identity, but while Ethel meets with her, she declines to discuss the Crippen affair.

In a brief section of less than two pages, Larson returns for the last time to Ethel's story. He contrasts her solo transatlantic voyage with her first, when she was also traveling under a name that was not her own in Crippen's company. Although she is too far from London to hear the bell that signals Crippen's execution, Larson writes evocatively of the moment when the bell tolls, connecting it to her history at Hilldrop Crescent.

Concealing her past, Ethel lives an ordinary life. The book closes with a striking open-ended question. A journalist who has finally discovered Ethel's secret asks her directly if she would marry Crippen, knowing his true story. The author concludes with this description: "Ethel's gaze became intent—the same intensity that Chief Inspector Dew had found striking enough to include in his wanted circular. Ethel's answer came quickly" (p. 392). Choosing not to report Ethel's answer, the author invites readers to reach their own conclusions.

Characters

Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937)

Guglielmo Marconi is the brilliant innovator who pioneers the use of wireless transmission. His story is at the center of the history narrated in Thunrderstuck. Marconi grew up south of Bologna, Italy, and is enthralled from an early age by electricity. On reading an obituary of Heinrich Hertz, the 20-year-old Marconi is struck by the notion that it is possible to send messages using the electromagnetic waves that had been the basis of experiments conducted by Hertz.

Using patient trial-and-error, Marconi gradually increases his ability to send messages, from basic signals to complete sentences. His financial fortunes fluctuate, but he maintains a lavish lifestyle. Although his spoken English is flawless, he is perceived in Britain as a foreigner, which limits his business opportunities as well as his personal life.

The narrative places particular emphasis on Marconi's inability to put himself in place of others, a trait that causes offence and impairs his professional and romantic relationships. The author uses the phrase "social blindness." At the same time Marconi is portrayed as persistent and canny, an early entrepreneur. When he marries, another side of his character is shown in controlling and suspicious behavior. Ironically, although he is not a professional scientist, he is awarded a Nobel prize for physics - a field in which he has no background or training.

Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen (1862-1910)

Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen is the quiet medical doctor who is found guilty of murdering his wife in the case of the North London Cellar Murder. Born in Coldwater, Michigan, Crippen enrolls in the University of Michigan's School of Homeopathy in 1882, although he leaves without graduating. His medical career takes him across the U.S. and to England, where he is employed by a series of patent medicine companies.

The author builds his portrayal of Crippen's character from many contemporary accounts. Crippen is unfailingly described as gentle and amiable. His attraction to Belle, however, remains something of a mystery, and his willingness to be exploited by her is clearly a weakness in his character. The author can only speculate about what finally pushed Crippen to commit murder, and the physical stamina that would have been required to commit the crime is still in question a century later.

Despite the fact that Crippen is a convicted murderer, however, Larson treats him sympathetically. His quiet, unambitious character is in sharp contrast to that of the volatile, striving Marconi.

Captain Henry George Kendall

Kendall is the sea captain of the SS Montrose whose alert observations lead to the apprehension of Crippen and Ethel in Canada. Kendall has a reputation for intelligence and professionalism. Although he seems to enjoy being the object of attention during the Crippen pursuit, he handles the suspects so delicately that they do not realize that their identities have been discovered. His later writing about the Crippen case provides one of the book's primary source materials.

Oliver Lodge

Lodge is a renowned professor of physics at the University College of Liverpool. His interests include electricity, magnetism, and the supernatural. He becomes one of Marconi's most persistent rivals. It is implied that his work on electromagnetic waves would have been more significant had he not been distracted by his competing interest in spiritualism.

Annie Jameson Marconi.

The mother of Guglielmo Marconi, Annie Jameson Marconi is a Protestant Irish whiskey heiress. She accompanies him to London in 1896. Her relationship with Marconi's first wife, Beatrice, is complicated by her adoration for her son.

Cora Turner, also known as Belle Elmore

Although her birth name is Kunigunde Mackamotzki, this character is known as Cora Turner in the first part of the book. This is the name she is using when she meets Crippen. Later in London, she calls herself Belle Elmore along with a few other stage names. She marries Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen, who bankrolls her attempts to embark on a career as a music theater performer. Belle follows Crippen to London, despite her outspoken dissatisfaction with their marriage.

Queen Victoria

Queen Victoria's death in 1901 seems to signal the end of an age. By the end of her long reign, Victoria has become a symbol of a stagnant society. She has spent a large part of her life grieving for her deceased husband, Prince Albert, and has made few public appearances. Although most Britons remember no other queen, she is a remote figure.

Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, later Edward VII

Edward VII ascends the British throne in 1901 on the death of his mother and rules for roughly a decade. Social, sophisticated, and fun-loving, he brings a glamor to public life that was missing during the latter part of his mother's reign. His death in 1910 brings the Edwardian period in England to a close.

Kaiser Wilhelm II

Kaiser Wilhem II is the emperor of Germany, whose militarization of his country is one of the causes of World War I. The Kaiser takes an early interest in Marconi's discoveries, and promotes Telefunken as an independent wireless provider in Germany.

William Preece

Preece is the chief electrician of the British Post Office who is an early supporter of Marconi. He is excluded from the formation of Marconi's company.

Bruce Miller

Miller is a one-time prizefighter who develops a close relationship with Belle Elmore. He encourages her to resume her performance career, and his affectionate letters come under scrutiny in the aftermath of the North London Cellar Murder.

Nevil Maskelyne

Nevil Maskelyne is a magician and gadfly wireless experimenter who delights in exposing the shortcomings in Marconi's transmissions.

John Ambrose Fleming

Usually known as Ambrose Fleming. A professor of electrical engineering and an associate of Oliver Lodge. Fleming is intermittently under contract to the Marconi company, although his desire for the limelight creates stress with Marconi.

Josephine Bowen Holman

An heiress originally from Indianapolis who meets Marconi in 1899 on a transatlantic ship. They are engaged for a time, but the engagement is broken off because Marconi is preoccupied with his wireless experiments and has little time for a romantic relationship.

Ethel Le Neve

Ethel Le Neve is a young girl who is Crippen's secretary and later his love interest. Ethel is employed as a typist in a patent medicine company where Crippen works. She is attracted to the quiet doctor, who wins her over with his kindness and apparent unhappiness in his marriage. Ethel moves in with Crippen after Belle's disappearance, and when he proposes that she should dress as a boy and leave the country with him, she willingly agrees.

Richard Vyvyan

An engineer and early associate of Marconi's. Vyvyan is responsible for the construction of the transmission stations at Poldhu and South Wellfleet. He is aware early on that Marconi's transmissions have problems with accuracy and reliability.

Paul and Clara Martinetti

The Martinettis are friends of the Crippens who are regular visitors to the Hilldrop Crescent house. They are with Crippen and Belle on the night before her disappearance, and they are among those who are suspicious of Crippen's explanation for her abrupt departure.

William Long

Long is a trusted longtime colleague of Crippen's. Crippen asks Long to procure the boy's clothes that Ethel uses in her escape.

Frank C. Froest

The head of New Scotland Yard's Murder Squad. Froest is the first to hear of the suspicions of Belle's friends after her disappearance. He agrees that further investigation is warranted, and calls in Inspector Dew to take charge of the case.

Walter Dew

Chief Inspector Dew took part in the Jack the Ripper case and is the primary investigator in the Crippen case. Initially he does not suspect foul play, and his first search of the Crippen home uncovers no tangible evidence. He is alarmed by Crippen's disappearance, however, and circulates a flyer containing descriptions of Crippen and Ethel. On learning of Kendall's suspicions on board the SS Montrose, Dew boards a fast ship, traveling as "Dewhurst." He succeeds in intercepting the fugitives when they arrive in Canada, and escorts them back to England on another ship.

Beatrice O'Brien

Beatrice O'Brien meets Marconi after his engagement to Josephine Bowen Holman is broken off. She is eleven years younger than Marconi, and refuses his first proposal before agreeing to the marriage, which takes place in London in 1905. Beatrice is taken aback by Marconi's jealousy and controlling behavior, and she is often left alone while he travels for work. In 1923 the marriage ends in divorce.

Arthur Mitchell

Detective Sergeant Arthur Mitchell is Dew's assistant in the Crippen investigation.

Objects/Places

The SS Montrose

This is the vessel owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway that conveys Crippen and Ethel as second-class passengers across the Atlantic in 1910.

Royal Institution, 21 Albemarle Street, London

This organization is founded in London in 1799 for the advancement of science. Important discoveries are made in its laboratories, and its lectures are closely followed by the general public and print journalists as well as by science professionals.

Coldwater, Michigan

This is the birthplace of Hawley Harvey Crippen in 1862, where he grew up in a family of ardent Methodists.

Wireless Telegraph and Signal Co.

This is Marconi's original company, formed to capitalize on his experiments in wireless communication, founded in London in 1897.

Poldhu

This is the Cornwall location of one of Marconi's early transmission stations.

Hyoscine hydrobromide

This is a poison compound that is deadly in minute quantities.

Albion House, New Oxford Street, London

This is the building where Crippen's last office is located. Coincidentally, the meetings of the Music Hall Ladies' Guild are also held here.

39 Hilldrop Crescent, Kentish Town, London

This is Crippen and Belle's last London home, located off the north side of Camden Road. The address becomes notorious as the scene of the North London Murder investigation. It is later destroyed by a Luftwaffe bomb during World War II.

Glace Bay, Nova Scotia

This is one of Marconi's early transmission stations and the site of innovation regarding the height of transmission towers.

Father Point

This is the place on the St. Lawrence River where pilots took control of ships to guide them through the seaway to Quebec.

Old Bailey

This is the historic London criminal court where Crippen's murder trial takes place.

Pentonville Prison

This is the scene of Crippen's execution in 1910. The prison is located not far from the house on Hilldrop Crescent where the North London Cellar Murder was committed.

Music Hall Ladies' Guild

This is a London-based charity organization formed to benefit needy performers. Belle Elmore becomes an active member of this group and many of her closest friendships originate here.

Signal Hill

This is Marconi's transmission station in Newfoundland and the site of his experiments using balloons and kites to aid wireless transmission.

Themes

Innovation and Progress

Thunderstruck demonstrates that many aspects of the modern world have their origins in the period inhabited by Guglielmo Marconi and Dr. Crippen a century ago. The late Victorian and Edwardian ages contained the seeds of what we think of as the technological architecture of today. In many respects, Marconi's discovery of the capabilities of wireless communication could be said to have led to the Internet, satellite communication, and other inventions that have resulted in the interconnectedness of the world of the 21st century.

During the early 1900s, the period portrayed in Thunderstruck, the world was literally speeding up. Transportation was diversifying and becoming faster. Change and innovation were also accelerating, aided by the relative ease of communication. The worldwide exchange of information was facilitated first by cable transmissions and telegrams as well as the faster speeds of ships, trains, and vehicles that delivered regular mail. Eventually cable was superseded by the achievements of wireless, as chronicled here.

In particular, the book examines the unlikely overlap between the development of wireless communication and the capture of a murder suspect in a nautical chase. The dramatic pursuit of an alleged murderer gained an international following as a direct result of improved methods of communication that included wireless as well as the proliferation of international newspapers and journals. The new speed of wireless communication and its use on ocean vessels made Crippen's arrest possible. The world was newly interconnected, in the early stages of reliance on the rapid transmission of information. In an earlier age, Crippen and Ethel would have been much more likely to have made good their escape. The Crippen case, and the resulting attention to the achievements and reliability of wireless, made the popular acceptance and spread of wireless inevitable.

There is an undercurrent of nostalgia in Thunderstruck, however, for that earlier, slower, and less entangled world, which the author highlights in his two mentions of J. M. Barrie's Peter Pan. The popular play, which had its premiere in 1904, focused on a boy who never wants to grow up. The play recreated a time when pleasures were simpler and daily life seemed less complex. The innovation that produced such significant advancements in communication also brought about the loss of that more innocent time.

Uses of Communication

Many types of communication media are important to the narrative in Thunderstruck, from the proliferation of newspapers with a global readership to the evolution of wireless communication. Interpersonal communication is also significant, as well as

communication with the spirit world, which formed a large part of Oliver Lodge's endeavors. Long before the modern Internet, communication in the time of Thunderstruck was varied and global.

Marconi spent his career working on advancements in wireless communication. He was one of the first to be convinced by its potential for sending signals and messages, although he had difficulty convincing the general public to accept his vision. The Crippen case is seen to have decisively proven the reliability and utility of wireless communication.

Ironically, while brilliant in pioneering the use of wireless for communication, Marconi is shown to be much less skillful in personal communication. He is characterized as being careless in interpersonal relationships and heedless of the feelings of others. His wife as well as his business associates felt the effects of what author Erik Larson calls his "social blindness." It is telling that the master of technological improvements in communication was so inept in other communication abilities.

Innovation in communication was significant not only for important messages, but also for entertainment and more trivial exchanges, as demonstrated by the Marconigrams that passengers enjoyed sending from ocean voyages to their friends at home.

Finally, written communication in books, journals, newspapers, telegrams, and court transcripts provides the bedrock of source material that the author has used in writing Thunderstruck. Communication in multiple forms is a critical element of the narrative.

Pursuit of Happiness

The two main characters of Thunderstruck are both intensely pursuing their life's dreams. Their goals are markedly different, and they go about it in contrasting ways. Taken together, the two men offer a look at the human condition from diverse vantage points.

Marconi's lifelong mission is to realize the potential of wireless communication, and he sacrifices personal relationships with his first wife and the children of that marriage in order to realize his dream. It isn't entirely clear whether this is a purposeful choice, or whether his social deficits and passion for work make it difficult for him to maintain close relationships.

Crippen, by contrast, appears to have little professional ambition other than to earn enough money to keep Belle contented, which proves to be an impossible task. His quest is to achieve personal happiness, which he finds in his relationship with Ethel Le Neve. His overwhelming desire to create a life with Ethel, however, leads him to an act that brings about the death of the relationship as well as Crippen's own execution.

Style

Perspective

In Thunderstruck, the author is a trusted narrator, usually writing in the universal and omniscient perspective. He knows what has happened and what lies ahead, and he guides the reader through a story that is organized according to how he wants it to be told. Throughout the book, the narration whipsaws back and forth between the stories of Marconi and Crippen. These shifts occur within sections, chapters, and even pages, but the transitions are skillfully handled and produce a momentum that helps to propel the story forward.

The chronology of the two histories is generally maintained, but quoted material from court transcripts and later writings is regularly incorporated to provide background details and additional information that is sometimes retrospective.

As an omniscient voice, the author uses frequent and pronounced foreshadowing to call attention to events that will become important later in the narrative and to build suspense. The book, as history, is told throughout in the past tense.

At one point, the narration turns epistolary, quoting a letter and telegram from Crippen to the Martinettis that tells them of Belle's illness and death. The quoted material stands alone and speaks for itself, without narrative intervention. Together the two items take up a single page and they offer an emphatic punctuation point to the narrative distance that has been maintained.

Tone

The author's gift for perceptive and creative language makes this an engaging read. He demonstrates his delight in language on every page, and is a particularly inventive user of simile and metaphor. A few examples: Morse code is compared to "invisible confetti" (p. 347); the street outside the Royal Institution is like "a great black seam of coal" (p. 9); and the nearness of Holloway Gaol "stole the warmth from a sunny day" (p. 159). Of special note is the way the author's choice of words accurately bears out the mood that he is invoking.

The author is proficient in explaining the science underlying the development of wireless communication. He succeeds in making this a readable and accessible story for those lacking a background (or, indeed, interest) in science. The trial-and-error experimentation of wireless pioneers, he says, was "like playing chess with pieces ungoverned by rules, where a pawn might prove to be a queen for one turn, a knight for the next" (p. 152). Strangely, he fails to give a full explanation of the "thunder" phenomenon from which the book derives its title. He mentions this property several times, but doesn't tell the reader how or why the noise was generated by electromagnetic waves.

As the narrator, the author employs subtle humor, particularly with vocabulary pertaining to the science of his story (he refers to an "electric experience," p. 151, and says "The world seemed galvanized," p. 329). Another effective device is his use of brief phrases, often at the beginning of a paragraph or the conclusion of a passage, like "Of course" (p. 180) and "Well, not absolutely" (p. 243). "AH" (p. 264; note capitalization) stands alone at the end of a chapter when Crippen tells Dew (falsely) that Belle is still alive.

The author is interested in the strengths and weaknesses of his characters, but his voice is largely sympathetic and understanding of all human foibles. Even in describing Crippen, he seems tolerant of the stresses that have led him to murder. The character for whom the author appears to have the least amount of sympathy is Belle.

All the dialogue in the narrative has its source in direct quotes that come from contemporary letters, transcripts, telegrams, books, newspapers, and journals.

Structure

As a work of history, Thunderstruck follows a roughly chronological order. This poses a narrative difficulty, however. Marconi's work with wireless communication spans most of the first decade of the twentieth century, while the main events of Crippen's story take place during a single year, 1910.

The interconnectedness of the two narratives, which underscores the development of wireless communication and its vital role in apprehending Crippen as well as informing readers about the unfurling of events while Crippen is being pursued, is accentuated by Larson's mingling of the stories, so that sections veer from Marconi to Crippen repeatedly, often in very brief sections that set up a parallel between the stories. This device can be confusing, however, because it is easy to assume that the stories are unfolding simultaneously.

In one especially unwieldy transition, the author dramatically notes the death of Edward VII in 1910, calling it the end of an era. On the following page, however, the narrative rejoins Marconi's story several years earlier. In general, however, the device builds momentum and helps to hold readers' interest.

The titles of each section pertain to themes that can be identified in the stories of both Marconi and Crippen. Techniques that give the story its forward momentum include the bite-size passages within chapters that are already brief, paragraphs that may only consist of one sentence, and even one-word paragraphs.

The author skillfully incorporates quoted material from transcripts, telegrams, letters, and newspaper articles, as well as from books written by Marconi, Marconi's daughter, and Dew. The quoted material is superbly chosen, and smoothly integrated with the rest of the narrative. A generous notes section provides more detail about the author's sources, along with supplemental material that didn't fit into the main narrative. The book is also illustrated with a small selection of contemporary black-and-white photographs.

Quotes

"Within twenty-four hours Captain Kendall would discover that his ship had become the most famous vessel afloat and that he himself had become the subject of breakfast conversation from Broadway in New York to Piccadilly in London. He had stepped into the intersection of two wildly disparate stories, whose collision on his ship in this time, the end of the Edwardian era, would exert influence on the world for the century to come" (The Mysterious Passengers, p. 5).

"It was not precisely a vision, like some sighting of the Madonna in a tree trunk, but rather a certainty, a declarative sentence that entered his brain...Later Marconi would say there was a divine aspect to it, as though he had been chosen over all others to receive the idea" (Part I, Ghosts and Gunfire, p. 15).

"As the end of the century approached, a question lay in the hearts of Britons throughout the empire's eleven million square miles: Without Victoria, what would the world be like? What would happen then" (Part I, Ghost and Gunfire, p. 57).

"As [Marconi] himself had admitted, he was not a scientist. His grasp of physical theory was minimal, his command of advanced mathematics nonexistent. He was an entrepreneur of a kind that would become familiar to the world only a century or so later, with the advent of the so-called "start-up" company"
(Part II, Betrayal, p. 69).

"Over the next two weeks Queen Victoria, Edward, and his doctor, Sir James Reid, traded 150 messages, the nature of which demonstrated yet again that no matter how innovative the means of communication, men and women will find a way to make the messages sent as tedious as possible" (Part II, Betrayal, p. 97).

"The race to build the first useful system of wireless telegraphy—the race, really, for distance—was well under way. Someone had to win, and timidity would not be an asset" (Part II, Betrayal, p. 104).

"On January 5, 1909, she [Belle] bought him [Crippen] three pairs of pajamas at the annual winter sale at Jones Brothers, a clothier, soon to prove among the most significant purchases of her life" (Part III, Secrets, p. 166).

"To anyone watching, the whole quest would have seemed utterly hopeless, deserving of ridicule—three men huddled around a crude electrical device as a gigantic kite

stumbled through the sky four hundred feet overhead. If not for the atmostphere of sober concentration that suffused the room, the scene would have served well as a Punch parody of Marconi's quest" (Part III, Secrets, p. 183).

"...I should not mind showing to anyone of standing and position who does not start off from a skeptical point of view. I will not demonstrate to any man who throws doubt upon the system" (Part IV, An Inspector Calls, p. 242).

"The biggest hurdle that remained was the skepticism that still confronted long-range wireless. For reasons [Marconi] could not understand, the world continued to see it as an invention of limited use, and nothing he did seemed capable of draining once and for all that vast and persistent reservoir of doubt"
(Part V, The Finest Time, p. 313).

"The Crippen saga did more to accelerate the acceptance of wireless as a practical tool than anything the Marconi company previously had attempted..."
(Epilogue, p. 379).

Topics for Discussion

There are numerous parallels between the early decade of the 20th century as depicted in Thunderstruck and the first decade of the 21st century, such as the fast advance of technology, fears of terrorist (anarchist) attacks, and immigration problems. Elaborate on the similarities and differences of these topics and their implications in the setting of Thunderstruck and today.

In reference to Marconi's early business modal, Thunderstruck notes the "tension between science and enterprise, openness and secrecy" (p. 243). In what ways was the competitive environment faced by Marconi and his company similar to today's rapid innovations in social media? In what ways was it different?

How would you compare Marconi's entrepreneurial style to that of today's business innovators? Would Marconi have been a success in the business climate of the 21st century?

In the pages of Thunderstruck, Marconi is regularly described as being socially inconsiderate, Crippen as being mild and amiable, Belle as having bad taste. Is this simplified style of characterization helpful to the reader and the progress of the narrative, or would a more nuanced characterization serve the story better?

Both Marconi and Belle are characterized as spending extravagantly. How does the author's language differentiate between their spending habits? Is gender bias at work? What clues do their spending habits reveal about the underlying characters of these two?

To some extent, Crippen is portrayed as a victim of his circumstances. Given his character, to what extent was his crime inevitable? Could the disastrous end of his relationship with Belle have been avoided, and if so, how and when?

It's often said that Marconi "invented" radio, yet the author of Thunderstruck uses the term "wireless communication" instead. Why do you think Thunderstruck avoids the use of "radio"? Discuss the author's choice and its implications for the narrative and the book's audience.