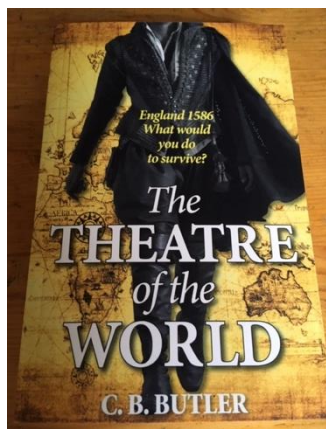


Review of *The Theatre of the World* by Cheryl Butler



I was inspired to read this book because it's a novel about Southampton in the time of Queen Elizabeth I written by a local historian, which I expected would take me three months to finish – but I read it in three weeks! The size is daunting (770 pages including list of characters, map, glossary and Author's Note), and I found it a real page-turner, full of fascinating people and amazing incidents, some more believable than others but all contributing to the atmosphere and bustle of the times. The protagonist, Richard Mudford, a man on the make from poverty-stricken beginnings was a real person as are several of his family and associates, and many local characters are based on the names of people who appeared in Southampton's *Mayor's Book of Fines*, the subject of Cheryl Butler's PhD. Some well-known personalities from late Tudor England also make appearances, such as the Queen herself, Robert Cecil, the Earl of Essex, and others: sea captains (Drake), military leaders (Norreys). There are scenes of explicit violence and sex, while the spelling is often idiosyncratic (perhaps following the practice of the time). Some readers may find this problematic, but it is impressive to see how the author has woven a vivid and imaginative tale around the places, events and people of the period.

The book deals with preparations for the Armada and its aftermath up to the death of Elizabeth I, as a background for the fictional ventures of Richard and his brother Jack in privateering, and the details of Richard's involvement in the Earl of Essex's Cadiz expedition, his imprisonment, his marriages and many children, and his business dealings are clearly fiction. But Richard had another side, he loved poetry, music and theatre and he wanted to have his children well-educated. Some of the buildings associated with the family were or are real, such as Bull House, the Angel Inn (now the Duke of Wellington in Bugle Street), St Julien's church and the first home of King Edward VI School, and many streets in the old town still exist. This of course adds to the interest of the book for those familiar with the town and its history. As the title suggests this was a time when people from a port like Southampton could play their part in 'the theatre of the world', although others preferred the older ways and could not cope with change; and as it happened the town's prosperity was not to last for long after Queen Elizabeth's death.

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