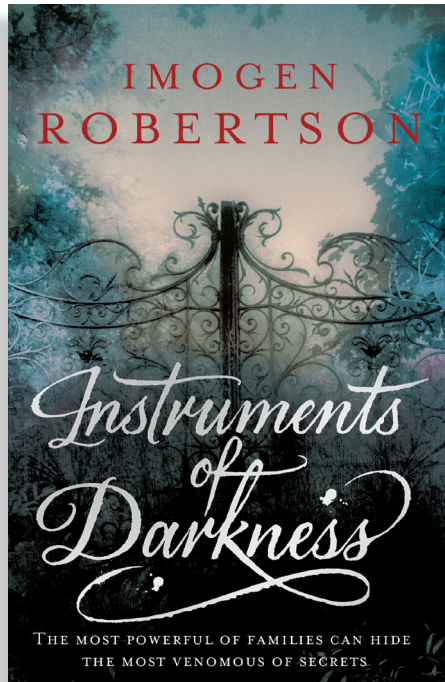


## Reading Guide






### **Instruments of Darkness**

Imogen Robertson  
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# Imogen Robertson

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## About the book

A body in a field. A murder in a music shop. A missing heir to a great estate. These three seemingly separate mysteries prove to be intimately intertwined in Imogen Robertson's thrilling debut novel *Instruments of Darkness*, an engrossing blend of eighteenth-century history, forensic science, and classic suspense.

The year is 1780. Bold, unconventional navy wife Harriet Westerman finds the body of an unidentified man in the fields of her country manor. The only clues to his death lie in his hand: a torn slip of paper and a ring with the crest of Thornleigh Hall, the neighbouring estate. Years ago, the heir to the hall ran away, never to be heard of again, and the family—now only a crippled father, his whorish new wife, and his drunkard son—slowly fell into disrepute. At the same time, London is seized by riots, but widower Alexander Adams has a happy home and a successful music shop. Then, without warning, Adams is murdered in broad daylight—in front of his two young children—and without any apparent motive. Hidden away in the safety of a friend's house, the two children mourn the loss of their father while living in fear that the murderer will return for them.

Determined to solve the murder, Harriet turns to the one person who can help her. Gabriel Crowther—anatomist and recluse—has exactly the scientific knowledge and disregard for the conventions of society needed to uncover the truth. Despite his solitary life, Crowther has an astute understanding of human nature and enjoys the intellectual challenge that the crime presents. This, combined with Harriet's keen empathy and sense of justice, makes them a formidable pair, unrelenting in their pursuit of the truth. Yet their dogged determination unearths more than even they anticipated, threatening to reveal Crowther's own dark secret and risking the security and happiness of Harriet's entire family.

From squires to scullery maids, the grime of London to grand estates, Imogen Robertson has created a world rich in period detail and rife with dramatic tension. She is a brilliant new voice in the world of historical suspense, and with *Instruments of Darkness* she offers a web of intrigue, false clues, and macabre science, and the novel's shocking final twist will leave readers talking—and clamouring for more.

**“Robertson’s enjoyment of the period and her characters is infectious.”**

**—The New York Times Book Review  
(Editor’s Choice)**

## Discussion questions

1. What did you know about the Georgian era before you read this novel? In what ways is that world familiar or similar to twenty-first-century life? Were the characters easy to relate to?
2. Did reading the grisly scenes of battle, death, and medical investigation make you squirm or are you drawn to similar topics when choosing a book or movie?
3. Mystery novels provide us with the chance to participate with the characters in the plot—knowing only as much as they know, learning as they go along. What is the appeal of a mystery? What are the qualities of a good suspense novel? Do you have any favourites?
4. As you struggled to solve the mystery along with Harriet and Crowther, who was your first suspect and why? Were you right?
5. Who was the dead man in Harriet's field? How did he get there? How did he get the Thornleigh family ring?
6. How do greed and ambition influence some of the characters' behaviour? Consider not only characters who commit grandly self-serving acts, but also those who behave in more subtle ways to advance their situation financially or socially.
7. In what ways are Harriet and her sister representative of the status of women in eighteenth-century England? What social constraints do they battle? What is each woman's response to society's expectations?
8. Why were the citizens of London rioting? Why did it put Miss Chase's family at risk?
9. Although he doesn't appear in the book, Harriet's husband plays an important role in the story. Describe Harriet's relationship with her husband. At what point(s) in the story does she think of him? Why?
10. If *Instruments of Darkness* were a film, who would you cast as Harriet and Crowther?
11. Choose one of the secondary characters in the book and discuss what happens to him or her after the story closes.
12. Examine the last sentence of the novel. Why did Robertson end the book this way? What was your reaction?

## A conversation with the author

**Q.** *Writing this book was developed in part by your winning The Telegraph's First Thousand Words of a Novel competition. In what ways has the novel changed since those first thousand words? Did winning the contest alter your approach to the book or develop your confidence as a writer?*

It changed a great deal! I actually went back and had a look at the competition entry to answer this question, and even though it was written only in 2007, it was like reading my teenage diaries. Novels develop as you write them, so inevitably your first drafts of the opening of the book are going to be very different to the finished version. It also takes awhile for a book to develop its own tone of voice, so that's something else which makes change inevitable. One big structural change—in the competition entry Susan and Johnathan's mother appears. In the finished novel she has already died before the story begins. All that said, there are a lot of lines that have stayed the same. It's still up there on the Internet under the title Ties that Bind if anyone wants to compare!

Winning the competition was the biggest single moment that made me a professional writer. I had had a couple of short stories published and started in on the novel, but it was tough to fit in serious work on the book between TV contracts. I'd actually written about thirty thousand words of Instruments, then came to the painful conclusion that I needed to start over. Those fateful thousand words that won the competition were my first attempt at beginning again. When I won the competition, I had just finished my most successful year as a freelance director and actually had some money for a change, so I decided not to look for work and just write the book. I would never have had the courage to do that if I hadn't won the competition.

**Q.** *Your journey from contest winner to published novelist is a dream come true for many aspiring authors. What advice or encouragement would you give to writers just starting out?*

Number one is keep writing. Number two is keep reading. Number three is keep thinking, challenge your work and challenge yourself. Number four is have faith; it takes only one

phone call to turn you from an aspiring writer to a working novelist. I'd also say don't be afraid to get in touch with your favourite authors. They are not going to be able to read your manuscript or get their agent to represent you, but a lot will take the time to give you an encouraging word and that can be a great boost. We all remember what it was like slaving away, wondering if we were any good and if we'd ever make it.

**Q.** *As a former film and television director, this novel marks your move from a visual medium to a written one. In what ways did your earlier career influence your writing?*

It sounds like a big leap from children's TV to historical crime, doesn't it? Actually, working in TV taught me an enormous amount about pacing and structure, and about the discipline of storytelling in general. I still think in very visual terms as I write and in the language of TV (wide shots, close-ups, cutting pace, and point of view). Of course it's all happening in my head now rather than on a set, which allows me to have much more spectacular locations!

**Q.** *Writing any novel is a complicated endeavor, but a mystery brings particular difficulties, such as maintaining suspense and how and when to reveal details of the plot. How did you address these issues?*

You learn by doing. As I plan and write my books, I am constantly asking myself if events are moving too fast or too slow; if I am leading readers into an unfolding story at the right pace; if the characters are developing; if they are acting, that is, making the story happen, or if things are just happening to them. I also read a lot of crime fiction and mystery and spend a lot of time thinking about what makes those books work. Writing is a craft, like furniture making. You serve an apprenticeship, study the masters, and one hopes, keep developing your skills.

**Q.** *At the end of the book, you mention a few authors whose works provided historical context for you while writing. Were there any mystery writers whose work was an inspiration?*

Loads of them. I am a fan of golden age crime writing, particularly the later books of Dorothy L. Sayers. I also love

modern psychological crime novels, such as those by Nicci French, fantastic, pacy reads that are beautifully written. I have devoured every Tess Gerritsen novel that appears. Tess was also an inspiration as I was beginning to write because of her incredibly honest and open blogging about being an author. I e-mailed her at the time to say so, then a few years later was able to send her the finished book. I was quite teary when I got her e-mail saying how much she liked it. In fact, I got a note from Nicci Gerrard, half of the husband and wife team that is Nicci French, saying how much she liked Instruments too. More excited teariness. It's an amazing thing when your writing heroes start turning round and saying, "You've done good." And Wilkie Collins, of course. Not that he's sent me any encouragement from beyond the grave, but I blame my entire career on having read Woman in White as a teenager.

**Q.** *Why did you set the novel at the end of the eighteenth century? What appeals to you about this era? Do you have any favourite literary characters or writers from the that century?*

I've always been fascinated by the social history of that time, particularly the role of women. A lot of the historians I mention at the end of Instruments I read long before the idea for the book came to me. It was a world of extraordinary contrast—there was a new wealth and sophistication as the effects of the Enlightenment and the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution began to be felt, and an increasing fluidity in the class system. But it was also a time of brutality and sudden violence, without modern medicine or anything like modern law enforcement. Also I knew I wanted to write about crime and that I wanted to write about ordinary people forced to investigate the community around them, so there was a huge appeal in setting the book at a time before there was anything like a professional police force across Britain.

I certainly have heroes from that time: Horace Walpole, Fanny Burney, Henry Fielding. Their letters and biographies, as well as their novels, blew the doors off the eighteenth century for me and allowed me to feel like I could inhabit their world for a time.

**Q.** *The scientific and medical details in the book are fascinating. Of course, for Crowther to be credible as an expert, you had to become knowledgeable on such topics first. How much research did you undertake, and how did you approach the work?*

I love research, which is a good thing. Of course, Crowther knows a great deal more about such matters than I do. It is possible to create characters who know a lot more than the writer; think of Hannibal Lecter, though I'm sure Thomas Harris knows a lot! In practical terms, I talked to various medical professionals, and I read a great deal of what people were writing at the time on anatomy and physiology. Then it's a case of giving the right detail at the right moment to demonstrate Crowther's knowledge without producing a text book rather than a novel. Each book normally takes about six months solid research, and in the writing it's those sorts of technical details that I'll particularly revisit.

While wealthy and titled, Crowther exists on the edge of society; Harriet, although more conventional by comparison, is unusually blunt and bold for a woman of her social station. Their independence and intelligence unite them, but in what other ways do you see them as similar?

Harriet's experience as a naval wife has made her something of an outsider, like Crowther. I think she rather envies his isolation. At the same time, though Crowther has chosen to remove himself from society, I think he sees something in Harriet's life with her family that he realizes he is lacking and is attracted to as well. I suppose I am saying that they make a good partnership because of their differences as well as their similarities. That said, they are also both a little contemptuous of other people's opinion of them, perhaps foolishly so.

**Q.** *Harriet is a striking character who would be remarkable in any time period, but as an eighteenth-century woman, these attributes are even more impressive. How do you think she develops over the course of the book? What do you see as her key moment in the story?*

She is used, I think, to sweeping all in front of her and leaving her husband, and to an extent her sister, to handle the consequences and guard her reputation and that of the family.

She has an encounter toward the end of the book with one of the characters she has been used to dominating, when the tables are turned, and she realizes the very profound danger she has been drawn into because of her curiosity and rather impetuous nature. She realizes, perhaps, by the end of the book that the civilized world around her is a more complex and somewhat darker place than she thought, and her safety in it more illusory than she believed. She is a wiser, more battle-hardened woman on the last page than she was on the first.

**Q.** *The solution to the mystery is both surprising and satisfying. Without giving too much away, how did you balance forgiving and empathizing with the actions and crimes of the characters while providing catharsis and a feeling of justice for the readers?*

I think in writing a novel like *Instruments* I am making a deal with my readers. Come with me on this journey and I will provide you with a satisfying conclusion; that means offering catharsis and some sense of justice. At the same time there is no point creating cartoon baddies and just knocking them down. You can't expect your readers to be engaged if you do that, so it is important for writer and reader to understand why characters behave as they do. The villains have to be as alive and vivid as anyone else in the novel; that means making them fully rounded characters who have the capacity to surprise, and surprise you into feeling for them, no matter what they have done.

**Q.** *You've written another novel about Crowther and Harriet. Any clues as to what the next book is about?*

Harriet and Crowther find themselves in London. A body is retrieved from the Thames and they are asked to investigate how it got there. Their discoveries lead them into the glittering world of the opera, its stars and fellow travellers, the slums of London, and a deadly conspiracy.

## About the author

Imogen Robertson directed for TV, film, and radio before becoming a full-time author. She also writes and reviews poetry. Imogen is the author of several novels, including the Crowther and Westerman series. She was shortlisted for the CWA Ellis Peters Historical Award 2011 and for the CWA Dagger in the Library Award 2012. The Paris Winter was partially inspired by Imogen's paternal grandmother, a free-spirited traveller who set off through Europe with money sewn into her skirts.



## Also by Imogen Robertson

Crowther & Westerman Series  
Instruments of Darkness  
Anatomy of Murder  
Island of Bones  
Circle of Shadows  
Theft of Life

The Paris Winter