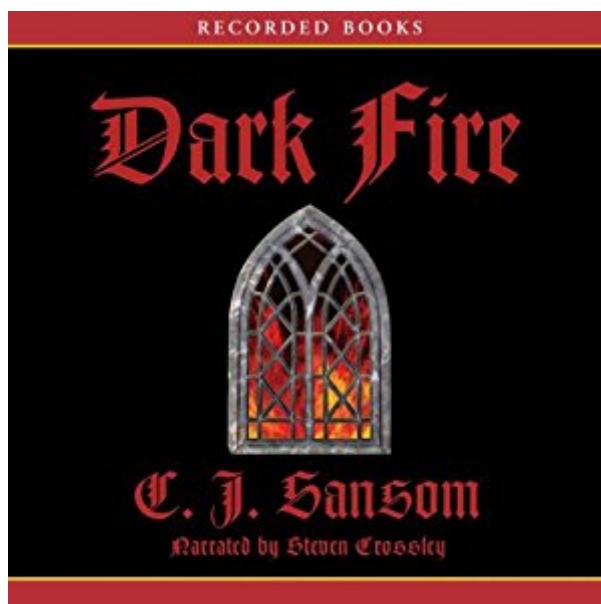


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Dark Fire: A Matthew Shardlake Mystery



Synopsis

From the bestselling author of *Winter in Madrid* and *Dominion* comes a second riveting sixteenth-century thriller featuring hunchback lawyer Matthew Shardlake. In 1540, during the reign of Henry VIII, Shardlake is asked to help a young girl accused of murder. She refuses to speak in her defense even when threatened with torture. But just when the case seems lost, Thomas Cromwell, the king's feared vicar general, offers Shardlake two more weeks to prove his client's innocence. In exchange, Shardlake must find a lost cache of "Dark Fire," a legendary weapon of mass destruction. What ensues is a page-turning adventure, filled with period detail and history. "Atmospheric and engaging" (Margaret George), this second book in Matthew Shardlake Tudor Mystery series delves again into the dark and superstitious world of Cromwell's England introduced in *Dissolution*. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I had plans for this weekend. I had household projects to finish, a few errands to run, that sort of thing. None of them were accomplished, because -- for the first time in a long time -- I fell headfirst into a novel and didn't even want to climb out. *Dissolution* was a good book, which I thoroughly enjoyed. However, because "murder in a monastery" is a familiar trope, it doesn't have as much of a sense of surprise or historical interest. Or perhaps the author is simply getting better with each book -- which is quite an accomplishment, considering how well he writes now. *Dark Fire* succeeds on a number of levels. The protagonist is interesting, both as a man of his times and an "enlightened" person who considers difficult questions. The writing immerses the reader in the era: not just the

intertwined mysteries to be solved, but the smell of the Thames, the desperation of the beggars who once worked for the monasteries, the fascination with the discoveries arriving from the New World. And boy -- did Sansom pick an interesting time to write about, with political and religious upheaval that affected nearly everyone. Yet, he doesn't let the scenery get in the way of the story. As with most mysteries, it's difficult to discuss the plot without giving it away. I'll just say that it's deliciously complex without being so twisty that you lose track of what's happening. Great book, in other words. The sort we all love to discover. Highly recommended for anyone who wants a novel to keep your mind engaged without requiring serious scholarship.

C J Samson's second novel opens three years after the events at Scarnsea and we find our hunched hero, Matthew Shardlake getting involved in a criminal case where Elizabeth Wentworth is accused of the murder of her cousin. The facts are sketchy, Matthew's convinced of her innocence. The only problem is the accused refuses to speak. Cromwell steps in to gain some time from the accused being *peine forte et dure* but the cost is Matthew must convince the renegade augmentation clerk, Gristwood to hand over the newly re-discovered formula to greek fire. Which swiftly proves impossible as Matthew and his new side-kick, Barak, find Gristwood dead. What follows are three plots lines as Samson weaves them altogether in a tangle so you're never sure which character is actually associated with which nefarious deed. Matthew rides round London, first on Chancery, then on another steed after Chancery winds up dead after saving Matthew's life, with twelve days to save Elizabeth, find out who is removing his cases from him and discover the whereabouts of the alchemist's formula. Into the mix Samson stirs the lawyer, Bealknapp, with his unsavoury eye for financial gain, Sir Richard Rich, who is going round converting dissolved monasteries into tenement deathtraps, Lady Honor Vaughan, famous for her sugar parties and eclectic dinner conversation, the overly boorish and ambitious Lord Norfolk, the poorly lineaged but ever-grasping Serjeant Marchamont, and Matthew's master again, Lord Cromwell. Amongst it all a host of supporting characters from the downright nasty Wright and Tokey to the apothecary, Guy (from the first novel) move amongst the slums and mansions of London, from the Thames to the suburbs. With Barak at his side they race through St Paul's Cathedral, jump walls and climb down wells, leap from burning buildings and dig up corpses as the pair weave through the growing list of murders to find conspiracy at a personal and political level that reaches from the courts to the King. By the end Matthew has unravelled the mysteries, a new political order is in place and loose ends are tied up as he heads north for a quiet life. Samson's writing is electric, clearly at the same level as Susanna Gregory as he brings Tudor London to vivid life where its harshly regulated

lifestyle of informers and accusers draws the reader into breathing the very dirty air of such a tormented city. The prose is crisp and precise, the characterisation pointed, the plot effusive. Utterly worth reading and hopefully Samson will produce more tales of his put-upon hero for this reader, at least.

Tudorian England is brought to life in this highly suspenseful novel of murder and mayhem in London. Its 1540, and King Henry is preparing to divorce his fourth wife, the German Anne of Cleves, and marry "the harlot" Catherine Howard. All of London is on shaky ground, as loyalties shift back and forth. Everyone is concerned that, with Catherine as Queen of England, the country will be returned back to its Catholic past. Into all this comes Thomas Cromwell, advisor to the king and strongly out of disfavor due to the Cleves marriage. Cromwell feels that he must get back into the graces of king by digging up Greek Fire- a Weapon of Mass Destruction that could make or break the future of England. He will give the king a demonstration on June 10th- an innocuous day, since it turns out to be the day on which Cromwell is arrested by the king's men. Greek Fire itself, a real substance, was invented by the Byzantines and needs petroleum in order to make it work properly. It is called Dark Fire because the formula is of a black color. The author made up the whole bit about Greek Fire being rediscovered, since there is no way that the English could have known about natural gas in the 16th century. Despite this, this is an excellent read. Matthew Shardlake is a highly regarded lawyer in the City. On the same day that he is hired to investigate Greek Fire, he is also called to investigate the case of Elizabeth Wentworth, who supposedly pushed her cousin Ralph down a well. The case is a gruesome one; and what is found down at the bottom of the well is not for the squeamish. The case of Greek Fire leads Shardlake and his assistant, Barak, to investigate the ruins of the old monasteries, torn down in the eight years since King Henry's break with Rome. In the course of their investigation, they have run-ins with a pock-faced man, a wealthy noblewoman, and the uncle of Catherine Howard. London is detailed in intimate detail, and emphasis is placed upon the lives of ordinary people in 16th-century London. This is an exciting, fast-paced read, good for anyone who likes mysteries and historical fiction. In addition, the author includes a very helpful historical note at the end which details the historical authenticity of Greek Fire and explains the whole Henry-Anne of Cleves-Catherine Howard-Thomas Cromwell deal.

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