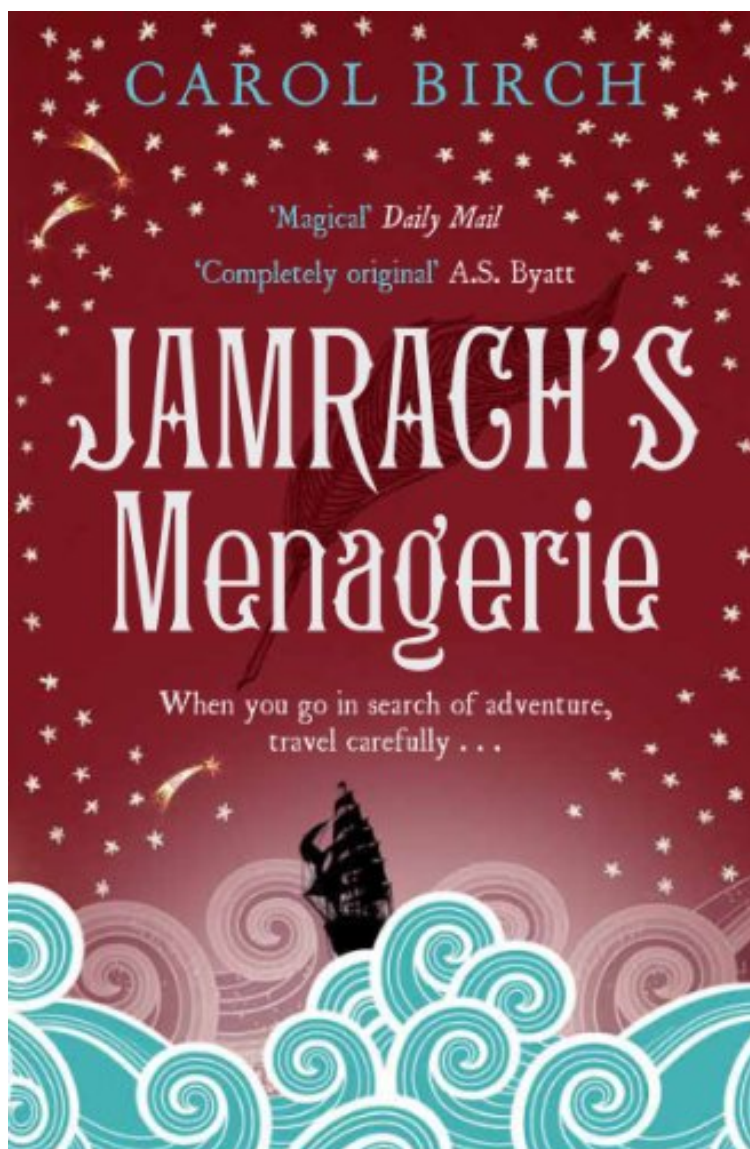


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Jamrach's Menagerie



Par Carol Birch
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurJaffy Brown is running along a street in Londons East End when he comes face to face with an escaped circus animal. Plucked from the jaws of death by Mr Jamrach explorer, entrepreneur and collector of the worlds strangest creatures the two strike up a friendship.Before he knows it, Jaffy finds himself on board a ship bound for the Dutch East Indies, on an unusual commission for Mr Jamrach. His journey if he survives it will push faith, love and friendship to their utmost limits.ExtraitChapter 1I was born twice. First in a wooden room that jutted out over the black water of the Thames, and then again eight years later in the Highway, when the tiger took me in his mouth and everything truly began.Say Bermondsey and they wrinkle their noses. Still, it was the home before all other homes. The river lapped beneath us as we

slept. Our door looked out over a wooden rail into the channel at the front, where dark water heaved up an odd sullen grey bubble. If you looked down through the slats, you could see things moving in the swill below. Thick green slime, glistening in the slosh that banged up against it, crept up the crumbling wooden piles. I remember the jagged lanes with bent elbows and crooked knees, rutted horse shit in the road, the dung of sheep that passed our house every day from the marshes and the cattle bellowing their unbearable sorrows in the tannery yard. I remember the dark bricks of the tanning factory, and the rain falling black. The wrinkled red bricks of the walls were gone all to tarry soot. If you touched them the tips of your fingers came away shiny black. A heavy smell came up from under the wooden bridge and got you in the gob as you crossed in the morning going to work. The air over the river though was full of sound and rain. And sometimes at night the sound of sailors sang out over the winking water--voices wild and dark to me as the elements themselves--lilt from everywhere, strange tongues that lisped and shouted, melodies running up and down like many small flights of stairs, making me feel as if I was far away in those strange hot-sun places. The river was a great thing seen from the bank, but a foul thing when your bare toes encountered the thin red worms that lived in its sticky mud. I remember them wriggling between. But look at us. Crawling up and down the new sewers like maggots ourselves, thin grey boys, thin grey girls, grey as the mud we walked in, splashing along the dark, round-mouthed tunnels that stank like hell. The sides were caked in crusty, black shit. Peeling out pennies and trying to fill our pockets, we wore our handkerchiefs over our noses and mouths, our eyes stang and ran. Sometimes we retched. It was something you did, like a sneeze or a belch. And when we came blinking out onto the foreshore, there we would see a vision of beauty: a great wonder, a tall and noble three-masted clipper bringing tea from India, bearing down upon the Pool of London, where a hundred ships lay resting like pure-bred horses getting groomed, renewed, readied, soothed and calmed for the great sea trial to come. But our pockets were never full. I remember the gnawing in my belly, the hunger retch. That thing my body did nights when I lay in bed. All of this was a long time ago. In those days my mother could easily have passed for a child. She was a small, tough thing with muscular shoulders and arms. When she walked she strode, swinging her arms from the shoulders. She was a laugh, my ma. She and I slept together in a truckle. We used to sing together getting off to sleep in that room over the river--a very pretty, cracked voice she had--but a man came sometimes, and then I had to go next door and kip in one end of a big tumbled old feather bed, with the small naked feet of very young children pushing up the blankets on either side of my head, and the fleas feasting on me. The man that came to see my mother wasnt my father. My father was a sailor who died before I was born, so Ma said, but she never said much. This man was a long, thin, wild-eyed streak of a thing with a mouth of crooked teeth, and deft feet that constantly tapped out rhythms as he sat. I suppose he must have had a name, but I never knew it, or if I did Ive forgotten. It doesnt matter. I never had anything to do with him, or he with me. He came when she was humming over her sewing one day--some sailors pants gone in the crotch--threw her down upon the floor, and started kicking her and calling her a dirty whore. I was scared, more scared I think than I had ever been before. She rolled away, hitting her head against the table leg, then up she jumped, screaming blue murder, that he was a bastard and a fly boy and shed none of him no more, flailing with her short strong arms and both fists balled for punching. Liar! he roared. I never knew he had a voice like that. As if he was twice as big. Liar! You call me a liar? she screeched, and went for the sides of his head, grabbing him by both ears and bashing his head about as if it was an old cushion she was shaking up. When she let go he wobbled. She ran out onto the walkway hollering at the top of her voice, and all the neighbour women came out at a run with their skirts hoicked up, some with knives, some with sticks or pots, and one with a candlestick. He dashed out amongst them with his own knife drawn, a vicious big stabber raised over his shoulder, damning them all as whores and scattering them back as he ran for the bridge. Ill get you, you bitch! he yelled back. Ill get you and Ill cut out your lights! That night we ran away. Or thats how I remember it. Possibly it was not that night, possibly it was a few days or a week later, but I remember no more of Bermondsey after that, only the brightness of the moon on the river as I followed my mother barefoot over London Bridge, to my second birth. I was eight years old. I know we came in time to the streets about Ratcliffe Highway, and there I met the tiger.

Everything that came after followed from that. I believe in fate. Fall of the dice, drawing of the straw. Its always been like that. Watney Street was where we came to rest. We lived in the crows nest of Mrs. Regans house. A long flight of steps ran up to the front door. Railings round the basement area enclosed a deep, dark place where men gathered nights to play cards and drink strong liquor. Mrs. Regan, a tall, worn woman with a pale, startled face, lived under us with an ever-changing population of sailors and touts, and upstairs lived Mr. Reuben, an old black man with white hair and a bushy yellow moustache. A curtain hung down the

middle of our room, and on the other side of it two old Prussian whores called Mari-Lou and Silky snored softly all day long. Our bit of the room had a window looking over the street. In the morning the smell of yeast from the bakers opposite came into my dreams. Every day but Sunday we were woken early by the drag of his wheelbarrow over the stones, and soon after by the market people setting up their stalls. Watney Street was all market. It smelled of rotten fruit and vegetables, strong fish, the two massive meat barrels that stood three doors down outside the butchers, dismembered heads of pigs sticking snout upwards out of the tops. Nowhere near as bad as Bermondsey, which smelled of shit. I didnt realise Bermondsey smelled of shit till we moved to the Highway. I was only a child. I thought shit was the natural smell of the world. To me, Watney Street and the Highway and all about there seemed sweeter and cleaner than anything Id ever known and it was only later, with great surprise, that I learned how others considered it such a dreadful smelly hole. Blood and brine ran down the pavement into the gutters and was sucked into the mush under the barrows that got trodden all day long up and down, up and down, into your house, up the stairs, into your room. My toes slid through it in a familiar way, but it was better than shitty Thames mud any day. Flypapers hung over every door and every barrow. Each one was black and rough with a million flies, but it made no difference. A million more danced happily about in the air and walked on the tripe which the butchers assistant had sliced so thinly and carefully first thing that morning and placed in the window. You could get anything down Watney Street. Our end was all houses, the rest was shops and pubs, and the market covered all the street. It sold cheap: old clothes, old iron, old anything. When I walked through the market my eyes were on a level with cabbages, lumpy potatoes, sheeps livers, salted cucumbers, rabbit skins, saveloys, cow heels, ladies bellies, softly rounded and swelling. The people packed in, all sorts, rough sorts, poor sorts, sifting their way through heaps of old worn shoes and rags, scrabbling about like ants, pushing and shoving and swearing, fierce old ladies, kids like me, sailors and bright girls and shabby men. Everyone shouted. First time I walked out in all that I thought, blimey, you dont want to go down in that muck, and if you were small you could go down very easy. Best stay close by the barrows so thered be something to grab a hold of. I loved running errands. One way was the Tower, the other Shadwell. The shops were all packed with the stuff of the sea and ships, and I loved to linger outside their windows and hang around their doors getting a whiff of that world. So when Mrs. Regan sent me out for a plug of bacca one day for Mr. Reuben, it must have taken me at least a half an hour to get down to the tobacco dock. I got half an ounce from one of the baccy women and was on my way back with my head in a dream, as was the way, so I thought nothing of the tray of combs dropped on the pavement by a sallow girl with a ridge in her neck, or the people vanishing, sucked as if by great breaths into doorways and byways, flattened against walls. My ears did not catch the sudden stilling of the Highways normal rhythms, the silence of one great held communal breath. How could I? I did not know the Highway. I knew nothing but dark water and filth bubbles and small bridges over shit creeks that shook no matter how light of foot you skipped over. This new place, this sailor town where we will stay now nice and snug awhile, Jaffy-boy, as my ma said, all of it, everything was different. Already Id seen things Id never seen before. This new labyrinth of narrow lanes teemed with the faces and voices of the whole world. A brown bear danced decorously on the corner by an alehouse called Sooty Jacks. Men walked about with parrots on their shoulders, magnificent birds, pure scarlet, egg-yolk yellow, bright sky blue. Their eyes were knowing and half amused, their feet scaly. The air on the corner of Martha Street hung sultry with the perfume of Arabian sherbet, and women in silks as bright as the parrots leaned out from doorways, arms akimbo, powerfully breasted like the figureheads of the ships lying along the quays. In Bermondsey the shop windows were dusty. When you put your face close and peered, you saw old flypapers, pale cuts of meat, powdery cakes, strings of onions flaking onto yellowing newsprint. In the Highway the shops were full of birds. Cage upon cage piled high, each full of clustering creatures like sparrows but bright as sweets, red and black, white and yellow, purple and green, and some as gently lavender as the veins on a babys head. It took the breath away to see them so crowded, each wing crushed against its fellows on either side. In the Highway green parrakeets perched upon lamp posts. Cakes and tarts shone like jewels, tier on tier behind high glass windows. A black man with gold teeth and white eyes carried a snake around his neck. How could I know what was possible and what was not? And when the impossible in all its beauty came walking towards me down the very middle of Ratcliffe Highway, why would I know how to behave? Of course, Id seen a cat before. You couldnt sleep for them in Bermondsey, creeping about over the roofs and wailing like devils. They lived in packs, spiky, wild eyed, stalking the wooden walkways and bridges, fighting with the rats. But this cat... The Sun himself came down and walked on earth. Just as the birds of Bermondsey were small and brown, and those of my new home were large and rainbow-hued, so it seemed the cats of Ratcliffe

Highway must be an altogether superior breed to our scrawny north-of-the-river mogs. This cat was the size of a small horse, solid, massively chested, rippling powerfully about the shoulders. He was gold, and the pattern painted so carefully all over him, so utterly perfect, was the blackest black in the world. His paws were the size of footstools, his chest snow white. I'd seen him somewhere, his picture in a poster in London Street, over the river. He was jumping through a ring of fire and his mouth was open. A mythical beast. I have no recall of one foot in front of the other, cobblestones under my feet. He drew me like honey draws a wasp. I had no fear. I came before the godly indifference of his face and looked into his clear yellow eyes. His nose was a slope of downy gold, his nostrils pink and moist as a pup's. He raised his thick, white dotted lips and smiled, and his whiskers bloomed. I became aware of my heart somewhere too high up, beating as if it was a little fist trying to get out. Nothing in the world could have prevented me from lifting my hand and stroking the broad warm nap of his nose. Even now I feel how beautiful that touch was. Nothing had ever been so soft and clean. A ripple ran through his right shoulder as he raised his paw--bigger than my head--and lazily knocked me off my feet. It was like being felled by a cushion. I hit the ground but was not much hurt, only winded, and after that it was a dream. There was, I remember, much screaming and shouting, but from a distance, as if I was sinking underwater. The world turned upside down and went by me in a bright stream, the ground moved under me, my hair hung in my eyes. There was a kind of joy in me, I do know that--and nothing that could go by the name of fear, only a wildness. I was in his jaws. His breath burned the back of my neck. My bare toes trailed, hurting distantly. I could see his feet, tawny orange with white toes, pacing the ground away, gentle as feathers.

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