



# Unnatural Fire

*Fidelis Morgan*

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Restoration London, 1699 -- Anastasia Ashby de la Zouche, Baroness Penge, Countess of Clapham, and former mistress to King Charles II, has astonishingly been jailed in debtors' prison. Joining forces with her loyal ex-maidservant, Alpie, the formerly pampered and proper Countess sets out to make a living by working for the scandal sheets -- a line of work that inevitably leads her through some of the seamier byways of the city. She and Alpie find a welcome additional source of income when they are approached by a stranger who asks them to gather evidence to prove her husband is committing adultery. But the uncomfortable job of trailing after the handsome merchant in the depths of winter ends abruptly in a Covent Garden churchyard with a brutal murder.

Implicated in the crime, the Countess and Alpie find themselves drawn into a complex labyrinth of deceit, violence, and the mysterious world of alchemy. And the more they investigate, the more complex the picture becomes, involving everyone from the most decrepit back-alley criminals to some of the most influential people in all the land.

## Unnatural Fire Details

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Author : Fidelis Morgan

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# From Reader Review Unnatural Fire for online ebook

## Emma Rose Ribbons says

First things first: you HAVE to read this. What a find, I can't believe it's not more of a bestseller, it was so good! Unnatural Fire is the first in a series of mysteries featuring Countess Anastasia Ashby de la Zouche and her former maid Alpiew in Restoration England. It's for you if you like historical crime and it's definitely for you if you like comic mysteries or just want a good laugh really. It's such bawdy, outrageous fun! From the very first lines till the very last, time just flew by.

Let me list here what I absolutely loved about this book:

- The characters are all memorable. They're eccentric and bold and all superbly fleshed-out. The Countess and Alpiew (as well as Pigalle, one of the Countess's friends) are absolutely amazing - so fresh and fun and smart, the book is packed with their wit and all the better for it. I miss them so much already. The friendship between the women is wonderful and this book passes the Bechdel Test effortlessly.
- The sense of the period. When Fidelis Morgan gives you Restoration, she gives you a full picture of the period and the cast of characters as well as the places involved pretty much cover the era. From prison to court, you'll see it all. I learned a lot about alchemy. Since we have two female characters investigating and evolving in Restoration England, we witness the misogyny they suffer from in plenty of areas. Luckily for us the Countess and Alpiew never fail to point out how they disagree with their treatment because of their gender.
- The mystery - I found it completely engrossing. The author really explains it all and the finding of the clues and everything is beautifully put together, it felt absolutely genuine to me and I was never lost, the author makes sure of that. Nonetheless, not a soul can possibly guess whodunit so I was very pleased to have both the satisfaction of going through everything with the characters and being very very surprised with the ending (which I thought was in-keeping with the tone of the book: very unbelievable and yet the themes are very dark).
- The HUMOUR! You know me, that's my favourite part of ANY book and really the author gave me my share of laughter, this book is positively hysterical. Fidelis Morgan uses the humour one can find in Restoration plays (bawdy & physical humour) a lot and the characters are all excellent fun. I dare you not to laugh & be hooked from the first few pages.

I'm just so glad this book is the first in a series for I just can't let go of this world. There are three more books to look forward to. I found out about Unnatural Fire by perusing Felony and Mayhem's catalog - they have yet to reprint the other three but I'll watch out for them. I find the cover of the US edition much more attractive and emblematic of the book than the UK one.

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## Debra says

A fun romp in London in 1699. I read words I'd never seen before and learned, again, what a horrible place London was at that time... filthy stinky streets, unwashed people in dirty clothing, polluted Thames river, constant smog. No wonder people were getting sick all the time. But aside from that I really enjoyed this amusing little mystery that is investigated by a has-been countess and her maid. Great characters. Easy, quick

read.

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### **Angie Boyter says**

Very disappointing on two levels. 1. This could have been fun, but it was totally lacking in subtlety, and ALL of the characters I met in the first chapter were people I did not have any desire to know better....2. In addition, although the author alerts people that this is not a history book, I DO expect some conscientious attempt to get things right when you are giving what you call "History", which is the title of a section in the back of the book. In that section she says, with no qualifiers, that Isaac Newton was a homosexual. A VERY simple review, e.g., google, will show that Newton was a weird recluse who APPEARED not to have any interest in sex. This has led some to speculate he might have been homosexual. It is a VERY open question. To show him as homosexual in a work of fiction might be defensible; to say he was homosexual in the appendix is not, in my opinion.

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### **Gail says**

"Romp" is exactly the right word for this book, although I didn't find it particularly light reading, which would seem counter-intuitive to a romp, but there you have it. It's not light, for me, because it's crammed full of Restoration-speak and references that I wasn't quite equipped to muddle through. So, a bit slow-going at first, but nonetheless fascinating and fun. The mystery had me going until the end, and the characters were funny and engaging and delightfully odd. What struck me, though, was that this would have been well-suited for a more visual representation: a play or movie. This isn't surprising, considering the author is a playwright. There are elements of the theater throughout, too: dressers, actors, troupes, etc. All in all, a fun read, and I'll pick up the next one.

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### **Rachel says**

I grinned and chuckled my way through this. It's a historical comedy whodunnit romp and, looking at other reviews, I guess it falls into the Marmite category. I loved it, and I really hadn't been sure I would. The characters are over-the-top, the setting (London in 1699) was intriguing, I didn't guess who committed the murder, but I'm sure I should have - the clues were there. And the language kept stopping me in my tracks - is that really where that word/phrase comes from? (It was). A great fun read with a surprising amount of historical detail - I'll definitely read the others in the series, and I'll probably read up a bit on restoration England before I do.

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### **Lucy says**

Better than expected and I will read more in the series.

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## **Jana says**

I didn't care for the first few pages and almost gave up on this--but I'm glad I stuck with it. What an interesting period 1699 in London--and she really puts you there with so many possible scenarios-and a reader would never guess the ending. Strange, but great characters. The scene with Sir Isaac Newton hiding under the bed had me laughing out loud.

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## **Martin says**

Countess Ashby de la Zouche and her maid Alpieu trample around England during the Restoration period to uncover a mystery that reaches from the darkest alley to the highest wardrobe. As they run around London in the year 1699 they meet people from all walks of life and engage in every possible adventure that period had to offer.

I think I must have read this book with a skewed eye. I was expecting a historical murder mystery but instead this novel is a historical farce that plays lightly with mystery themes. Although the facts and figures in this novel are allegedly accurate, it is difficult to not keeping thinking some aspects are drastically exaggerated. The Countess Ashby runs around London as if wearing modern day jeans and without any hint of where the knowledge came from explains to everyone in the last few pages how the whole story sticks together. Even though the Countess is portrayed as a rather thick headed mistress of money, she apparently solves mysteries even Sir Isaac Newton could not untangle.

Again, if you read this novel for what it is: a farce with some comical overtones, then you will mostly likely be highly entertained. Even though many times I was frustrated I did enjoy this book for what it was: a nice past time in a historical setting.

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## **Almeta says**

Really a fun series. What a great pair the brash Countess and her resourceful "maid" are!

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## **Lacey says**

I really liked parts of this book and didn't like others. I like Alpieu, I can totally understand how having big breasts keep getting her in trouble. The countess on the other hand had moments of compassion and lucidity but other times was completely in her own reality. How she could ever let her husband come back and the ending....really! I'm having a hard time trying to comprehend their completely penniless state to her still being a somewhat respectable member of society. And the whole mystery that they try to solve throughout the book takes this really strange twist and is wrapped up rather quickly and ended up having very little to do with the actual mystery they were investigating. I'm on to the next book but this was a bit inconsistent.

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### **Carole-Ann says**

Since I spent my teenage years in Ashby-de-la-Zouch (Leicestershire) I thought an historical mystery might be a good option.

Not good enough to remember years later. :(

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### **Bronagh Miskelly says**

I enjoyed much of the first of this historical mystery series featuring two eccentric down-at-heel ex-royal mistresses (apparently based on real people) and the maid of one of them in late 17th century London. There is lots of historical detail and a clear plot involving alchemy, royalty and much more.

What didn't work for me was the inconsistent comic style - this has clearly been influenced by the restoration comedy theatre style of the period about which the author is an expert but it sometimes clashes with the rest of the story. That said I've never been a big fan of restoration comedy (least favourite part of by drama school, even counting the bad fall off a set during some Gorky)

I expect I will continue with the series because I'm interested to see how it pans out

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### **Marnie says**

I started reading this thinking it would be a typical historical mystery and quickly disabused myself of that notion. Think Monty Python meets Mrs. Marple. Once I wrapped my head around the fact that this book was a farce I enjoyed the ride. The opening scene, where the Countess and her eventual sidekick Alpiew are introduced to the reader, had me laughing out loud.

The author obviously did her research and was historically accurate about the times. The Countess and Alpiew were well developed and I enjoyed them.

The one drawback was the mystery itself- even when it was explained to me I still didn't follow the clues.

I enjoyed the characters and the setting and the witty banter spread throughout the book. I think the author did a great job helping me visualize Restoration London, 1699. I read that this story might be developed into a television series- I will be watching!

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### **Sarah Wagner says**

I had trouble getting into this historical mystery set in late seventeenth-century London. While the author does an excellent job of invoking the spirit of the times and providing a rich picture of life during the period, the writing itself simply failed to entice me into the story. I did manage to finish it, though, and was rewarded by a interesting conclusion to the tale as well as a very amusing scene featuring Sir Issac Newton.

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## **Audra (Unabridged Chick) says**

Set in Restoration England, this is the first in a series of mystery novels involving Lady Anastasia Ashby de la Zouche, former mistress to King Charles II, and her long-lost personal maid, Alpieu. Abandoned years ago by her ner-do-well husband, Anastasia is in debtors prison, struggling to eke out a living selling gossip to newspapers. After a quick reunion with Alpieu, they begin working together to make ends meet, and are hired to follow a noblewoman's philandering husband. Unsurprisingly, things are more complicated than they first appear, and much intrigue develops as the two women delve into the world of alchemists and actors.

I'm a lazy reader when it comes to thrillers and mysteries: I don't like to guess who the culprit is; because of that, I am terrible at evaluating how tight the plot twists are. I found the conclusion to be a bit outlandish, but it doesn't jar with the tenor of the entire novel: melodramatic Anastasia is constantly enthralled, bored, or in swoons while level-headed Alpieu is always a step away from doom.

Overall, a quick and fun read. The second book in the series, *The Rival Queens*, waits on my nightstand for a suitably slow weekend.

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## **Susan says**

Actually, it's 'currently re-reading.' I'm a sucker for historical novels, and anachronisms and other suspicious slips just get me started on trying to find out what historians think 'really' happened. History isn't all that far from fiction, after all...

Alchemy and Newton are some of the really fascinating details of this book. I have some trouble with the rotten teeth, body odor and general poor hygiene of everybody involved, but it's true to life in the period, so I live with it. The story is well told, colorful without being too far out there and quite funny.

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## **Beth says**

this book was strange. I really didn't think I was going to like it at first...it just took me a little longer to get into it. The writing and language of the book were a bit strange for me at first but later became quite endearing. I especially liked how the author used modern phrases although the book was set in the 1600's (I think- I'm horrible with history, I know it said in the book but I forget :) Anyway the little jokes were kind of a little nod to the modern reader. A fun little mystery with fun elements and puzzles that somewhat reminded me of 'The DaVinci Code' although not as involved...at all.

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## **Judith says**

A former mistress of King Charles 11, fallen on hard times, is forced to become a hack for a local Scandal Sheet,,in cahoots with her former Maid...they are given a "case" to follow a supposedly Errant Husband..and The Games Begin..

And here is where i give my Warning:

This book is a wonderful Comedy of Manners..a Satire..Slapstick Glorious...surrounding a not-bad Mystery...Ms Morgan is an expert in Restoration Comedy..and it shows...I loved this book for the Comedy (I needed a good laugh)..but the Mystery isn't/wasn't bad

Don't be mislead by the Mystery Tag...read this book if you enjoy a good story..if you like good period pieces..if you are CURIOUS...you will not be disappointed.

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### **Susan says**

Arrrrgh! I have said many times that it's the story and not the solution in a mystery that is important; but, God, there are limits! The solution for this story could have been that little green men from Mars did the killings, then covered it up so no one would believe in UFOs and it would have been just as reasonable to me. I am tired of people who have no real reason for being deranged showing up in otherwise perfectly lovely mysteries and destroying all the enjoyment I've already had. What is wrong with the butler; he hasn't done it in a long time. Lame, I admit, but I can take it. Try me. Please. Or at least warn me: STUPID ENDING ALERT!!!

Okay, I gave it three stars; but it was a really good story--mostly. I have a headache now. I'm going to lie down and think of kittens, and dew-drops, and such.

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### **Belinda says**

This has, as Val McDermid said (it is quoted on the cover of my book) "a heady compound of wit, wisdom and wildness", but not in spades. I'd say it is a tangled mass of historical tidbits, intrigue, and silliness.

It reads as an overwritten but pleasantly amusing script for something not as good as Blackadder but trying to get there. When I say trying to get there sometimes it is bloody trying, other times it is amusing but forgettable.

Likes - the main characters aren't bad. I like that they're all women and semi-intelligent among all the bawdiness and twists, although the code - that was like pulling teeth. I think Morgan can write quite well. It's obvious that there was quite a bit of research into London life in 1699. The pace is good for the most part.

Dislikes - it is definitely overwritten. There are repetitions, too many quaint little words and phrases that are sometimes explained, sometimes not, but need to be. I don't want to google every word and dish peculiar to that period. Then there were the modern bits squeezed in - no doubt to give us all a boom-boom moment a la Bruce Forsythe - LeRoy was here - no le Roi was here - boom, boom. Weak, very weak. Finally, and perhaps the worst of it, is that just too much was added to the mix. I know it wasn't meant to be a Hilary Mantell, nor does it have to be, but alchemy, sex, love, murder, potential blackmail, a creepy husband, detective work, corrupt lawyers, plays, politics, boobs, running to the wharf, running around London backstreets, mad rides out to the country, transvestites, another trek through either mud, poo, or fields, wine, Isaac Newton, cemeteries and blood....too much! You can be funny and not have everyone running around like Benny Hill and his bald sidekick - except they'd be called Count Benji Le Terrain a Slope Slope if they'd been named by



Morgan. This much cramming took it through a continuum starting with a mickey take to try-hard 3rd rate humour that a 9 year old might laugh at if it didn't have references to rumpy pumpy (snigger).

So did it do what it set out to do? Yes, it was a good romp, but no way was it witty or wise.

I do recommend it as a light read though.

Very light.

But I won't read any more of her books.

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