

The Apothecary's House by Adrian Mathews.  
Macmillan 2005.

During the Second World War the Nazis stole vast amounts of art of all kinds – from museums in occupied countries, from individual owners, and especially from Jews. Confiscation – in truth, plunder – of their priceless possessions was absolutely de rigeur. Some of this art made its way to German museums, some to the collections of senior Nazis, and when the war ended much of the loot was lost. In recent years systematic efforts have been made in several European countries to return stolen works of art to their rightful owners or their descendants.

It is against this background that The Apothecary's House is set. A bag lady walks into the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam one day and claims ownership of a painting by a Dutch artist. As the claim is investigated by Ruth, the museum's archivist, and her English colleague, a chain of events is started which not only threatens lives but which reveals a darker side of the German occupation of Holland during the war, and the less than honourable behaviour of some Dutch citizens.

This is a highly readable and very atmospheric novel, set in a tangible Amsterdam of old buildings, misty canals and narrow streets that is beautifully described, and with two quirky and original central characters about whom the reader really cares.

To say more would run the risk of revealing too much about the intricate, plausible and satisfying plot – which has enough twists and turns to please the most demanding reader – so I will just encourage you to read the book when you want an original thriller that sets new definitions for the genre.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh